

# Boomers, Millennials, Gen Z: Bridging Generational Differences

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Which generation do you belong to? In the past this question probably seemed meaningless, because only recently have we begun to separate people and their peers by categories based on age.

In past times someone might have interpreted this as a question about what role they occupy within their family: mother, child, grandfather, etc. But more and more today this question will draw out an immediate reply. “I am a baby boomer.” “I’m gen X” “I am a millennial.” “I guess I’m Gen Z, whatever that is.” But the question might also imply another one: “Whose side are you on?”

Categorizing people according to a succession of generations has now become customary across much of Western civilization. The Pew Research Center defines those generational cohorts according to birth year as follows:

- Generation Z: 1997-2012
- Millennials: 1981-1996
- Generation X: 1965-1980
- Baby Boomers: 1946-1964
- Silent Generation: 1928-1945

These aren't just age groups. Each one of these generations has a unique approach to the life-stage they're in at that moment, compared to those who came before and those who will follow after. While these distinctions and cut-offs may seem contrived and arbitrary, they can help us understand broad patterns within the national population. The Pew Research Center noted that:

***... generational cohorts give researchers a tool to analyze changes in views over time. They can provide a way to understand how different formative experiences (such as world events and technological, economic and social shifts) interact with the life-cycle and aging process to shape people's views of the world.***

In the past this succession of generations might have just denoted slight cultural differences between people of different ages – but today it's become something more.

If you see the things I see then you might agree that generational groupings have coalesced into antagonistic factions.

On social media you've undoubtedly seen the prejudice and scapegoating directed at particular age groups by those from other age groups. Millennials are seen as oversensitive whiners. Gen X are apathetic nihilists. Baby boomers trashed the planet. Gen Z is glued to their phones. Everyone seems to agree that every other generation has selfish and narcissistic tendencies.

Some of what is shared on social media is relatively harmless. Images of technology, pop culture icons, and consumer goods from a certain

decade can evoke a sense of camaraderie among users who are close in age. Jokes can poke fun at the ways parents and children don't understand one another. But other content veers dangerously close to hate speech, and makes me worry about where we're going as a society.

Abusive language combines with abusive behavior when these prejudices amplify conflicts within workplaces, families, communities, and the body politic. If millennials refuse to do "real work" then why should I listen to their concerns about their employer? If baby boomers are unashamed bigots then why should I help them address their sense of alienation from the world around them?

Pitting one generation against another feeds into zero-sum politics, in which one group benefits at the expense of another.

Older generations are more likely to lean on the wealth, influence, and power they've accrued through long experience in the adult world. Conversely, younger generations believe they can prevail if they stubbornly hold on to their way of doing things long enough for their elders to die out. In those ways, prejudice against other generations becomes an excuse to avoid self-reflection and accountability.

The teachings of the Baha'i Faith see each person as having particular talents and gifts to offer humanity as a whole. Where unity and cooperation exist, the combination of these spiritual contributions can become greater than the sum of its parts. Abdu'l-Baha said:  
... in the world of minds and souls, fellowship, which is an expression of composition, is conducive to life, whereas discord, which is an expression of decomposition, is the equivalent of death. Without cohesion among the individual elements which compose the body politic, disintegration and decay must inevitably follow and life be extinguished.  
– Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 57.

We're better off as a society if we learn from each other and build on each other's strengths, rather than arguing over which one of us, or which particular generation, is individually superior to everyone else.

The periods of time in which we have grown up have led to uneven development in personal qualities worthy of emulation. That means some generations are better at certain things than others. In my opinion, baby boomers tend to be generally better at community involvement and organization than younger generations. Gen Z undoubtedly has the greatest sense of urgency about addressing climate change. I would love to see those two qualities combined – but for that to happen, inter-generational unity and cooperation would need to improve.

We already have so many ways we close our hearts to each other. The last thing we need is another obstacle to fellowship and compassion. We would do well to keep in mind what the Baha'i writings advise:

Do not complain of others. Refrain from reprimanding them, and if you wish to give admonition or advice, let it be offered in such a way that it will not burden the hearer. Turn all your thoughts toward bringing joy to hearts. Beware! Beware! lest ye offend any heart. Assist the world of humanity as much as possible. Be the source of consolation to every sad one, assist every weak one, be helpful to every indigent one, care for every sick one, be the cause of glorification to every lowly one, and shelter those who are overshadowed by fear. – Ibid., p. 453.

I would like to offer the global Baha'i community as a model for how members of different generations can cooperate for the greater good. In it, I have seen noble and productive efforts to counteract tendencies toward generational factionalization.

To be specific, typically with regard to the baby boomers vs. millennials pairing which has become endemic to American life, I've seen Baha'i communities recognize problematic attitudes and behavior for what they are and take positive steps toward building healthy inter-generational relationships within the community. In all cases the key was a common commitment to Baha'i teachings on unity and spirituality.

So what have I learned from the Baha'i communities I've lived in? Generally speaking, youth have energy and freedom of movement. They tend to see the world today for what it is right now, rather than a deviation from a past that is more familiar. Their elders on the other

hand have had more time to reflect on their experiences and have greater perspective and wisdom to see similarities and differences between current events and experiences from previous decades. Young people are not necessarily open-minded, and the idea that old people can't change their habits is a myth. When they set their mind to it they can adapt to novel practices as adeptly as any 20-year-old.

We're not doomed to factionalization. It's possible to get off the track we seem to be on. Fruitful collaboration between members of different generations can strengthen the web of mutually supportive relationships we need in order to build a better world. Yes, we were all born in different eras, but we all share the present era as common ground. In that common era, today, we must tend to the inheritance we will leave behind for the generations yet to come.