

## The Millennial Generation Is Over. Who's Next?

by Donald Asher

The Millennial Generation is over. They have been a great group, with a compelling story. Coming of age in the crucible of 9/11, they felt a great surge of communitarian sentiment. They were sincere, malleable, and hard working, even if insecure and needy at times. They were the first digital generation, capable of picking up any technological device and making it sing. They never read a manual--they seemed to communicate directly with the device via some kind of mental connection. They were constantly and thoughtlessly creative. They were naturals at everything. They didn't have the angst of the Gen Xers, or the weighty baggage of the Boomers. In spite of their troubles at showing up on time, they've been a great generation.

But they are over. So over. For seven years I have asked auditoriums of students if they planned on putting in a year or two of service before going on with their professional careers or to graduate school. Immediately after 9/11 a majority of the room would raise its hands. They volunteered for everything. They couldn't get enough of being of service. If an organization didn't exist to do the type of service they had in mind, they just started a new one. But in the last two years this sentiment began to dwindle. Last week it finally happened. I asked a room full of privileged, smart, hard working and "going someplace" young people if they planned to pursue a year or two of service before going on with their own lives, and not one person raised a hand.

We had a moment of embarrassing silence, and we all knew some important, invisible line had been crossed. An era had passed. Then I went on with my lecture. These students may do great things, but they are certainly going to get paid to do them.

I began calling my friends in higher education and asking them if they noticed this shift, and almost all of them admitted it, even if reluctantly. It was like they had seen it, but not seen it. The students look the same, so sometimes it's hard to tell when they change. This change has been rather sudden. Over the last two years, the ship has turned.

"Last year, Habitat for Humanity built a little house out on our lawn, and it was mobbed by students. They hung around it all day, and they even slept in it. It was popular. But this year they walked right by it like it wasn't there," said one.

So, we all must wonder who's next. What do we know about this new, nameless group, and what shall we call them? I think we should call this next generation the Moat People. They don't feel that they can control the bigger forces and trends in this world. Their government is entirely beyond influence. Employers are capricious and irrational. So they want to get a little plot of land, an apartment, a group of like-minded friends, and build a moat around this haven.

Here's what we know about these Moat People:

They have witnessed the darkest hours of American politics. They grew up with the Rove Doctrine in full force. They have seen the government baldly use fear and manipulation to control the populace, and

then get caught at it, and then keep doing it anyway. Our candidates for president tell lies over and over again even after being outed on them. Some may argue that Bill Clinton invented lying, but he was a kindergarten dabbler next to the art forms developed by those who followed him. That's all these young people have ever known. Nothing cynical and debased surprises them. They expect little from their government, and most of all just want to be left alone.

They are the first American generation to hear that they will not fare as well as their parents. The smarter ones know this is because their parents borrowed the country and themselves into an unsustainable hole, but all of them believe that getting and keeping a home will be a major life accomplishment, to say nothing of raising children and building a brighter future.

They have never known a time when the U.S. wasn't in a financial crisis of one kind or another. There has been an asset bubble their entire sentient lives, one financial problem after another. First it was the dot-com bubble, and then it was real estate, and now it's The Big One. The U.S. has never been known, to them, as a producer of goods and services. It has always, to them, been a producer of financial shenanigans.

The country has been at war their entire lives, yet it has nothing to do with them. As long as the professional soldiers handle the heavy lifting, and the government insists that they not pay one dime in taxes to fund the wars, who could blame them? War is normal. Of course they want to dig that moat around whatever sense of security and peace they can muster.

And, just as with the Millennials, they have been told their whole lives that they are special. All children deserve to win a prize. They have grown up with helicopter parents who resolved every dispute, salved every blooded knee and wounded ego. If the world doesn't offer to continue with this level of support, why not retreat from it? Certainly, this is not a formula for embracing big challenges. No wonder 73% of them report being above average, and 51% want to be famous (Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA), while 58% *plan* to move back in with their parents after graduation (monstertrak), and 65% of them actually do (U.S. Census Bureau). To be fair, with the cost of housing, who can blame them?

There are some problems with this analysis, of course. Many in this generation will hang on to the idealism of the prior group. Some will fight the wars, and all will eventually pay for them. Some will volunteer, some will care about a greater whole, even if the trend has turned. And this generation is the most internationally focused ever, with more of them than ever before studying abroad and planning on having a career working abroad. They believe in the inevitability and goodness of globalism, which is, after all, a belief in the power of free markets. They see that their competitive advantage lies in a post-nationalist future. And no one could dispute that their environmental values involve concern for what is going on "over the moat." Environmentalism has become their new state religion, whatever private and local rites they may follow. And supposedly they are tuned in to this election like no group of young people in generations (we shall see). But one could argue that their concern for globalism and even environmentalism and politics is ultimately rooted in a concern for conditions inside the moat. Anyway, the moat is a psychic concept, not a geographical one. People who have the same views and values are

inside the moat, and people who don't are outside, regardless of who lives next to whom. We have atomized, and the one has become many. A country of psychic castles, surrounded by moats.

Long live the Moat People, and may they prosper.

BIO:

Donald Asher is a public speaker and writer specializing in careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming, and Just Plain Different*; *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*; and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why*. © 2010 Asher Associates. Don welcomes comments at [don@donaldasher.com](mailto:don@donaldasher.com) or see his web site at [www.donaldasher.com](http://www.donaldasher.com).