CHAPTER ONE

The Boomer Dilemma

Right now, millions of baby boomers are realizing they are no longer teenagers. For the next eighteen years, a line of approximately 78.2 million boomers will begin their exodus from middle age into senior citizen territory. Starting in 2010, almost eight thousand boomers will be turning sixty-five years old every day, or three hundred and thirty boomers every hour, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

People in their forties and fifties are seeing wrinkles, gray hair, and bodies that are not what they used to be, and it is scaring them. They think of where their parents and elderly relatives were at the same age and remember them being old. Boomers don't feel prepared for that. Having devoted their middle-aged years to the frantic pursuit of securing a future for themselves, boomers are now waking up to the realization that the joys and vitality of life are passing them by.

From the 1960s, when boomers came of age and started entering the work force and finding their individual identity in society, to the present, boomers have fundamentally shaped American culture as we know it today. Every artist knows that there is a direct correlation between the mind and imagination of the artist and what he or she paints on canvas or sculpts in clay. An angry or depressed artist

will produce works that emit those emotions to a viewer, and an artist full of joy and inner contentment will transmit a feeling of vibrancy and wholesome expansion. A similar parallel can be made to the values, lifestyles, pursuits, and attitudes of boomers and the world we now experience in the twenty-first century. It is important to understand this relationship to better appreciate and comprehend the boomer legacy—a trail that I now define an increasing alienation from and confusion about one's authentic self. Although their legacy includes important innovations in science, psychology, social reform, gender equality, and spirituality, it has likewise contributed to America's current cultural crisis and has shaped the nation into a populace that has lost its sense of civic virtue. By turning its back on the community- and family-based values that were the hallmark of boomer parents, the boomer generation is primarily responsible for our society's descent into social apathy, trivial pursuits, and unhealthy lifestyles.

I should make it clear that I am not suggesting that members of the "Greatest Generation," those born between 1911 and 1924 and who served in World War II, did not play a significant role in today's age of globalization, consumerism, and multinational corporate domination. Economists such as Milton Friedman, whose theories of free-market economics have essentially shaped the American economy since the Reagan presidency, when Alan Greenspan was first appointed as head of the Federal Reserve, belong to the Greatest Generation. However, the subsequent boomer presidents, Bill Clinton and George Bush, further strengthened the free-market economic system. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, we have been experiencing the rapid proselytizing of a religion of consumerism—which underlies both the spiritual materialism of New Age thinking and the moralistic colonialism of right-wing fundamentalism in American religiosity—at the expense of once-vital industries and authentic

spiritual altruism that made America the exemplar of the world during the aftermath of the Second World War.

The boomers are a generation that entered adulthood between the 1960s and the 1980s. They are a generation that wanted to have it all. Indeed, the baby boomers were the first generation that had been led to expect that they could have a superb education, a fulfilling career, a home with all the most recent appliances and gadgets, enjoyable relationships, and a family. While theoretically the boomers could have everything, practically, many could not. And many, although they attained all the prizes in the game plan, found that they could not achieve the happiness they had assumed would go with these prizes. They had worked too intensely, made (and in some cases also lost) a lot of money, and in the process burnt themselves out. Now, in the twenty-first century, we have millions of people who, if not completely demoralized, are walking around with a pervasive sense of unease and uncertainty. They have no energy. Their youthful idealism and rebellious expression, once this generation's historical signature, has nearly vanished. Now many boomers wish they could start all over.

The good news is that they can begin, if they're willing, a process of change and real transformation to renew the more positive ideals that once inspired their determination to address the wrongs, prejudices, and erroneous judgments in American society. Doing so requires actualizing one's self-awareness and synergizing this awareness with positive intentions and actions to improve the lives of others and their communities. One of the things I enjoy most is helping people reach a point in their lives where they're willing to make necessary changes, which is why I've written this book about the baby boomers' dilemma and our innate ability to live in the moment and recover what boomers have lost.

It has been wonderful to hear from people of all ages—from

teenagers to octogenarians and beyond—that my writing has made a difference in their lives. But in talking to members of the boomer generation I've been struck by the fact that so many are dissatisfied or have lost a sense of authentic purpose in their lives. These are some of the most well-educated, privileged, and savvy people in the nation. Why, in many cases, haven't they been able to use these assets to make necessary changes and find a measure of contentment? Some have understood intellectually the need to look within and reprioritize their lives, but they've been unable to translate that understanding into meaningful change. They've conscientiously tried exercises such as meditating or going on spiritual or health retreats, but their outlooks have changed little. As members of this generation have left youth and advanced into middle age and beyond, many have a feeling of emptiness and continue to search for something they haven't found. The spiritual experiment for seeking self-discovery has been one of the characteristics of the boomer generation. One early statistic estimated that 42 percent of boomers left their families' religion or faith group; this is a significant figure and indicates how important the pursuit of self-expression has been among boomers. Their adventurous spirit in exploring alternative lifestyles, new models of health, different foreign philosophies and religions and art, is still influential today.

You might think it has been this way for every generation, that every generation undergoes difficulty in finding contentment and everyone has midlife crises. I don't think this is completely true. Boomers sacrificed the values and qualities that built America in exchange for lives of superficiality and a vision that focused attention on things that lack any essential meaning. For this reason, I find that this generation is having a particularly rough time recovering what it has lost.

The question is "why?" The baby boomers grew up during a

unique time in American history. They may have reached adulthood in the socially tumultuous late 1960s and 1970s, but people actually absorb their values in childhood, and for boomers that was the 1950s and early 1960s, a time when conventional values, seemingly reinforced by America's recent victory in World War II and by a growing industrial economy, were stronger than ever. Some conventional values were, and remain, good, but some assumptions and attitudes prevalent in those days were counterproductive to human fulfillment. My observation is that many boomers still carry around, unquestioningly and even unknowingly, attitudes and assumptions picked up during those years that are now causing them to make repeated mistakes in their personal choices.

Later I will outline some of the more critical mistakes that I see baby boomers commonly make. Although these are my observations, the important thing is the investigatory process and coming up with answers that are right for you.

At times I will address the boomer generation as a collective group; on other occasions I will address boomers as individuals, looking at the conditions of their inner lives. Each, however, mirrors the other. Our inner world shapes the conditions of our outer world. If we are angry at ourselves, we will project that anger onto others. The collective of all individual inner worlds—especially when they share the same values and follow the same regimens during their lives—shapes society as a whole. Although we frequently twist ourselves into thinking that our suffering, alienation, stress, and depression are solely our own, we also share these problems with everyone we meet, especially our children.

When we have the better part of our nation engulfed in a labyrinth of consumerism and ceaseless selfish pursuits for self-gratification, we ultimately end up with a society of citizens alienated from their authentic selves and from each other. It is my conviction that it is a

moral imperative for boomers today to rekindle the spark that ignited their earlier civic and spiritual ideals and creative activism to reinstate a sense of sanity and balance in American culture. This was the underlying impetus for me to write this book. It is not important that you and I as boomers reap the rewards from our actions during our remaining days. Rather our motivation should be for the benefit of our children and their succeeding generations who will ultimately inherit the reins from us to govern and preserve American society in the not-so-distant future.

The Greatest Generation and Their Boomer Children

It is my belief that today's senior citizens—the members of the Greatest Generation—are the new "lost generation." They are the last of the American vanguard to have found meaning and purpose in the preservation and sustenance of the nuclear family, their communities, and nation. Before the arrival of boomer culture, preserving the health of these social units had always been a hallmark of American society. For the boomers' parent's generation, community defined a person's character. The Greatest Generation prided itself in what it had gained and what could be shared with others. Theirs was a culture of authentic altruism. It was all about interconnectedness and relishing the time spent with children, grandparents, and neighbors. Having food on the table surrounded by family, a steady job, a public education system for the children, clothing, and a house were all that was essential.

Stability is one of the keywords that best defines boomers' parents. One important area where they observed a pragmatic sense of stability was in the way they understood money and handled their finances. For them, a person's monetary power was determined by the amount of money saved rather than speculative assets. In other

words, they perceived their financial worth in very concrete rather than illusory figures. Of course, credit cards did not exist then and any kind borrowing was generally the exception rather than the rule. This was a generation forced to live within its means, ensuring stability and continuity in their lives.

Not long ago, I had a chance to visit my old neighborhood in Parkersburg, West Virginia, a small city on the Ohio River. By today's standards of suburban sprawl, everything looked small and worn. While strolling along the familiar streets, once the play area for me and my friends, I heard two elderly voices call my name. It was Ms. Zoller and Ms. Croft, now in their eighties. They recognized me as if it were fifty years ago when they were young parents. I stopped to have a conversation and was amazed how they could recall minute details about my life growing up in Parkersburg. I asked them why they continued to live here and one of them replied, "Where are we supposed to live? This is all we know. Everyone else is gone but at least we know each other." I could not help realizing that both of these kind women lived so much in the past. Whenever they had an opportunity to speak about how things used to be, their faces would light up. At the same time, I could not help but feel these two ladies, like most senior citizens, feel their children have pushed American society far beyond their reach.

The work ethic has always been a part of American culture, and the Greatest Generation raised it to the highest standards. They believed that everything we wanted had to be earned through effort. Therefore, parents of boomers rarely gave free handouts to their teenage children, unless they were among the very wealthy. For example, if a boy wanted a new bicycle, his dad might say, "Okay, but I will only meet you half way. You have to perform chores around

the house, or earn money cutting neighbors' lawns, and then you can have one." This was the kind of child-raising environment that transmitted a healthy merit-based work ethic to boomer children.

Then there came a brief time during the 1960s when the baby boom generation started to question their parents' work ethic altogether. Remember the "be-ins"? People were asking, in effect, "Why can't we sit around with flowers in our hair, and just be?" It may sound totally corny today, but I still think it was a darn good question. Unfortunately, it looks like most people have answered it, "Nope, it was a good idea at the time, but we can't just sit. Life's too complicated and demanding, so we've got to rush around like maniacs in our sport utility vehicles with our cell phones crammed to our ears. We've got to prepare for the next meeting, the next deal, the next activity, our children's future, our retirement. There's no time to just be."

Why is the boomer generation like that? Part of the reason is insecurity. The boomers were promised a golden future in the 1950s. At that time, everyone knew that with some study and hard work you could have all the basic essentials of the good life—the home, the car, and the family—most likely all would be financed by one salary from a company you could count on staying with for years. Two general assumptions were that most people would do better materially than their parents, and that society and the American Dream were by and large based on a meritocracy, so that the smarter you were and the harder you worked, the better you would succeed.

The change started in 1973 with the oil embargo. Suddenly there was a gasoline shortage, and talk about future severe energy shortages that would compromise our American way of life. As energy prices went up, so did inflation. And as the economic situation worsened, there no longer seemed to be a guarantee of the good life for everyone who worked hard. Women gained more access to the working

world in the 1970s, which constituted progress in a real sense; the downside was that increasingly both members of a married couple had to work full-time just to keep the children fed.

In the 1980s, Reaganomics further eroded people's sense of security because the idea of a social safety net was questioned, and government programs were being weakened or dismantled. The prevailing ethos was that of "everyone for himself," so that even if you were doing well during that time you knew deep down that should things fall apart, you'd be on your own. It was no longer government's place to step in and help.

It was also during the 1980s that our tax system was changed in a way that furthered the stratification of economic classes, so that the "haves" wound up having more than the "have nots." While there might have been enough of the pie to go around if it was evenly divided, that was not going to happen, so the idea was to become one of the "have" group, whatever it took. The boomers had been made an implicit promise by the Greatest Generation—that with a little effort one could have a golden future—and if later years seemed to rescind this promise, they'd just have to work harder to keep the promise alive.

That's why becoming a workaholic seemed a sensible option to many. An extension of this thinking was that one's children should become workaholics too, to ensure their futures. The idea of competition infiltrated most areas of life, growing into the defining characteristic of our nation and society that it is today.

I do think that competition is a wonderful thing when you're competing against yourself. For instance, while most people who run the New York City marathon have no hope of beating the front-runners, anyone can compete with his or her own performance of the previous year and try for a personal best. That's a healthy kind of competition that helps people grow. But the kind of competition

where you feel that you and your family have to grab yours before somebody else does is an unhealthy, mentally corrosive kind of competition. Many members of Generation X and the so-called Millennials—those in their twenties—define their lives around aggressive competition without regard for higher spiritual values in their present work or in the long-term results of their accomplishments. With the start of the downturn of the economy in 2007, more and more people are living pressurized, future-oriented lives that are based on the assumption that they're competing with the world.

The psychological consequence of always being possessed by the need to get ahead is that the mind becomes completely focused on satisfying its material desires and what the next move is to take the lead in the competitive game. The broader vision that enables us to perceive social and spiritual crises in our midst goes unnoticed. The problems around us are simply irrelevant because our self-gratification and need to get ahead in our consumer world takes precedence. Eventually, social and spiritual apathy set in.

During one of my radio programs in 2007, Dr. Jim Garrison, cofounder of the Gorbachev Foundation and president of Wisdom University, was a guest and we had very engaging dialogue about the aura of apathy that pervades America. According to Garrison and other historical scholars, the U.S. has been on a trajectory of growth and dominance on the world stage similar to that of other imperial powers throughout history. Today America stands at the apogee of what is known as the "imperial arc"—when wealth and power have been consolidated within a minority of elites (in our case, Washington and Wall Street)—the stage before imperial powers begin their gradual descent in status to becoming just another nation struggling among other nations. Or, in the worst case, the imperium decays into the dustbin of history. One requirement for

building a vital civilization is a population's sense of civic virtue and willingness for self-sacrifice, generally known in American history as the Puritan ethic. If there were evident wrongs committed by the governing powers of the nation, citizens felt an obligation to speak, and regarded their effort to correct those wrongs worthwhile. The values of civic virtue and self-sacrifice were certainly an admirable trait of American society during World War II when the Greatest Generation transformed industry with innovative technology and science to come to the aid of its Allies in Europe and defend against the Japanese. Likewise, the boomers during the 1960s and early 1970s believed exerting their sense of civic virtue was worth the effort to bring an end to the Vietnam War.

But what happens when the consolidation of powers becomes so domineering—such as dictating what citizens should eat and purchase, what drugs will cure their illnesses, and how they should entertain themselves—is that people no longer feel they can effect any positive change in their community and nation, and question whether making an effort is even worth it. Instead they begin to exchange their sense of civic virtue for self-entitlement. I believe this accurately explains the overwhelming apathy throughout most of American society today. But even more interesting, especially when we acknowledge that this consolidation of wealth and power in Washington, Wall Street, and the corporatocracy is a product of baby boomers' addiction to competition, consumerism, and the pursuit of wealth, it also explains why such a large number of today's younger generation hold no higher ideals.

I don't think we have to strategize, scheme, and sacrifice for the future in ways that cut down on our enjoyment of the present. The flip side of excessive future-orientation is to discover happiness and joy in the present. Once we realize the moment as an endless fountain