

Support our students

As we approach the beginning of the school year, I would like to take this opportunity to wish students well, both this coming year and in the years to come. The daughter of a friend of mine put it very well when she told her mom that “Your generation and grandpa’s had a good run, but I expect that luck will run out for me and my friends. The pandemic is probably just the beginning.” Of course, my friend felt awful that her daughter felt this way, but the ideas of two thinkers lend credence to her sense of foreboding.

According to Neil Howe and William Strauss, the authors of the 1997 book “The Fourth Turning,” every 4 generations (or every 80+ years) a cycle repeats in which each successive generation lives through, respectively, a High, an Awakening, an Unraveling, and a Crisis.

A destructive war most commonly kicks off the cycle. The collective suffering and shared sacrifice of a major war (such as, most recently, WWII) have historically reinforced social solidarity. Determined to put the chaos and destruction behind them, those who lived through it do their best to build stable institutions that can foster peace and security. Strauss and Howe identify such periods, where institutions are strong and individualism is weak, as “Highs.”

However, those growing up in this stable environment (in our recent history, the Baby Boomers born in the post-WWII era between 1946 and 1963) feel stifled by its security and conformity. As they move into adulthood, they challenge the institutional order (represented by, for instance, the nuclear family, government and organized religion) in the name of individual and spiritual freedom. The writers call such periods, epitomized by the countercultural ferment of the late 1960s and 1970s, “Awakenings.”

In turn, those who grow up during Awakenings (in our case, Generation X, born between 1965 and the early 1980s), are both skeptical of the espoused values of established institutions and repelled by the hypocrisy of those (in our case, the Baby Boomer “hippies” turned “yuppies”) running these same institutions that they had once attacked. While the institutions survive, confidence in them is shaken. As this individualistic (to the point of alienated) generation moves into adulthood, a period of “Unraveling” ensues as social solidarity continues to weaken and institutions become ever more distrusted.

The children who grow up during a period of Unraveling (in our case, the Millennial generation born between the early 1980s and early 2000s) are, by necessity, pragmatic and self-reliant. As those who had been adults during the previous crisis retire from positions of leadership, their successors (in our case, the Baby Boomers) often make poorly informed decisions that help to bring about the next “Crisis,” which usually erupts just as this generation (our Millennials) reaches adulthood.

To be specific, the 1980s through to the early 2000s saw disastrous developments in finance and national security. Looking first at banking, in the U.S., deposit-taking institutions were largely deregulated in 1980, while the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933 in 1999 did away with the separation between investment banking (Wall Street) and commercial banking (Main Street). Predictably, a succession of banking crises followed (notably, the Savings and Loans crisis of the

1980s and 1990s, the Mexican crisis of 1994, the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, and the ongoing Global Financial Crisis that kicked off in 2008).

Military conduct became similarly ill-considered. While George H.W. Bush, who had served in WWII, avoided prolonged military entanglement in the first Gulf War in 1990, his son George W. Bush, who sat out the Vietnam War in the Texas Air National Guard, rushed to invade and occupy both Afghanistan and Iraq, leading to a cascade of military interventions and humanitarian crises in the Middle East and beyond ever since.

Historically, the generation born during a period of Crisis (in our case, Generation Z, born from the mid-2000s onwards), has escaped its worst impacts. For example, while the G.I. Generation (born between 1908 and 1929) were teens during the Great Depression and served during WWII, the Silent Generation (born during the Great Depression and the war) enjoyed the stability and order of the postwar 'High' as they entered adulthood.

However, as this long crisis drags along, it becomes ever more likely that its acute phase (again, usually some sort of war - China invading Taiwan? An EMP (electro-magnetic pulse) attack designed to knock out electronic systems? A hack into critical infrastructure? Israel attacking Iran?) will occur as today's seniors (who, born in 2004, are either tail-end Millennials or elder Generation Z) enter early adulthood.

As such, they will be the ones to bear much of the burden of both navigating the Crisis and rebuilding our civic institutions and the social solidarity such institutions depend upon to function. If we care about our collective future, therefore, we must all commit to learning the lessons of our recent past and making the individual sacrifices necessary to support our students, as only by doing so can we, as a society, successfully navigate the coming Crisis and flourish in the High to come.