

Courtship of the younger voter

Let's face it, while we're all getting older, some of us like myself were already older when we started! My parents' generation grew up during the Depression, and they had a strong influence on me and that influence helped carry their generation's values well beyond themselves through me and my contemporaries.

Those of us in the Midwest (what some elite folks today call 'flyover country') experienced America during its 'gratitude phase' as it rebuild itself after the war. Patriotism wasn't some passing fancy or fad. It was real. We all felt a lump in our throat when the VFW or the National Guard marched down the cobblestone streets of our small town carrying 'Old Glory,' sporting polished helmets and crisp uniforms. They were inspiring as were the Independence Day speeches given by the Mayor and the occasional Congressman. Some cynics would say that these scenes were just old-style propaganda made to give the impression of America as a superpower that only existed because of its military might.

In my hometown, we'd call those people ignorant or worse. We knew, even as children, that people had sacrificed much so that we could spend our days in play. Why? Because our parents and grandparents took the time to TELL US about these sacrifices. They wanted us to know that life wasn't always so carefree and that the sun didn't rise and set with us. My grandfather talked about mustard gas and trench warfare and made sure that I didn't see death on the battlefield as something romantic.

Granted, Hollywood obliged us with WWII films that depicted us as the 'good guys,' but Hollywood wasn't the only source of information about that terrible war. There were plenty of 'old timers' (men in their thirties) who spoke of Guadalcanal, the Battle of the Bulge, Pearl Harbor and the concentration camps. There was no shortage of real human contact with people who had seen and experienced the worst life could (and did) throw at them. We respected these men and honored their sacrifice.

America was changing faster in the big cities than in rural Wisconsin. Crops still needed to be planted and harvested and livestock still needed tending to. God hadn't gone out of style and churches were full on Sundays. People were beginning to understand why segregation was wrong and laws were being made to reflect that fact. Businesses were beholden to their customers and were important to the communities they called home. We didn't need watchdog agencies to police them. Their conscience did that.

We were grateful for a job, and did our best to be the best at it, whether we were packing groceries, frying up a burger or plowing a field. We didn't covet each other's wealth or wish ill on those who had made it big. We congratulated them and then tried to replicate their success, ourselves. There were no 'authority figures' only people older and wiser than ourselves who had important jobs to do, like teach us. We never questioned these people about their bona fides though we might have questioned their teachings. That was, after all, what a good education was all about...mixing it up.

Our speech wasn't peppered with cuss words. We didn't need them to express an emotion or disfavor. We knew the difference between decent speech and unacceptable speech and the destructive power of an unkind word. We also knew that the person you cussed out today might be your boss a few years from now. If nothing else, we were practical about such things.

We also knew the difference between make-believe and reality. Saturday matinees at the local theatre might have made us more excitable for a few hours after seeing Audie Murphy or John Wayne, but that wore off when the reality of chores reared its head. There was nothing political about my youth, and I couldn't tell you if my parents were Republicans or Democrats because we didn't have those kinds of dinner table conversations. I do know they were Christians, however, because I went to two church services every Sunday; one Protestant and one Catholic.

People in my small town weren't preachy, but they were quick to give we wise guys our comeuppance if we did something wrong, even if our parents weren't with us. That was the thing about a small community; everybody was your parent or guardian. You weren't in any danger as long as an adult was nearby.

As we got older and became more interested in things like souped-up cars and rock and roll, our values sometimes took a backseat to more exciting pursuits...but they were always there with us, laying in wait for a conscience pang to trigger their emergence. Our upbringing didn't afford us an excuse for doing the wrong thing. Our upbringing taught us right from wrong.

Every generation complains about the next one. That's only natural because we don't want to believe that all the hard work we did will be for nothing. The same is true of today's current political civil war. No Administration wants its good work to be undone. No political special interest group wants to admit it can't achieve its objectives and no one wants to concede that our opponents' ideas are better than ours. We're quick to condemn and slow to forgive.

It's going to be damn hard if not impossible to reverse the course we're on, especially when so few Americans remember or know their history. We've made many of the same mistakes before that we're making now, and anyone who's lived a few years knows that. I desperately want to have faith in America's youth. I really do, but it's getting harder with each passing day and with each example by some Congressional Representative who's proving that there's no statute of limitations on ignorance.

Yes, the younger voter is gaining on us. My generation is coming into the homestretch of the voter sweepstakes. The youth voter is not only gaining on us, but will soon overtake us and that presents a challenge in the form of a decision. Should we just accept the inevitable and leave them to the forces of social media and the powerful ideological billionaires to figure out matters like socialism, income inequality, the environment and racism...or should we muster the courage and energy to engage these young voters of generations X, Y and Z before it's too late and give them an alternative to new age propaganda before we cash in our chips?

My answer is simple. I'm a pessimist when I sleep, but an optimist when I'm awake. I'm also a Midwesterner, and we don't quit working until the work is done.

Stephan Helgesen is a former career U.S. diplomat who lived and worked in thirty different countries specializing in business and tourism promotion. He is now a political analyst and strategist and author of nine books and over 1,000 articles on politics, the economy and social trends. He also operates a senior website, www.grayingmatters.com. He can be reached at: stephan@stephanhelgesen.com