

## **Generational Politics 2008: Winning by a Heir**

By Carol Orsborn, Ph.D.

Super Tuesday solidifies a revolutionary generational trend that has been in the works not only since Obama's win in Iowa, but since the beginning of humanity. The day after Super Tuesday, AP characterized the Democratic primary results as "an epic struggle" between the older generation's experience (Hillary) and the younger generation's urge for change (Obama).

There are many pundits, too, who can barely hide their glee at seeing the boomer generation—epitomized in their eyes by Clinton hubris, lust for power and self-centered concern—taken down by a youthful challenger. But blaming the boomers—or canonizing the next generation—is not the whole story.

In fact, between Obama's youth-fueled surge in Iowa and Hillary's tearing up on the eve of the New Hampshire primary, the boomer generation should be patting themselves on the back for a job well done. From the social scientist's point of view, both developments are signs of a healthy society regenerating itself organically. This is true of USA politics a la 2008, and it is equally true of the pre-modern societies that anthropologists study—at least the healthy ones.

Viewed through the scholar's lens, the Obama youth vote indicates that young people are feeling empowered as they flex their muscles at the doorstep of real power. But ironically, these events are actually also a vindication for baby boomers, accused of every self-centered sin from ego-driven entitlement to the selfish refusal to move gracefully aside for the next generation of political leadership.

The key to understanding why boomers should be applauded for Obama's vote and Hillary's tears is in what adult development pioneer Erik H. Erikson decades ago termed "generativity." Generativity means that in healthy societies, it is the parental generation's role to guide their offspring into adulthood, believing that the universe is basically trustworthy and meaningful. Without this, there is only apathy or rebellion.

Rather than represent a generational failure, those boomer parents whose children turned out for Obama, succeeded in raising offspring who are mentally and emotionally equipped to regenerate, revise and renew the worldview to which they have been born. This adult child is able to bound upon the scene with a robust confidence in themselves and their abilities. In summary, they have been prepared by their boomer parents to meet the demands of a new era. This is, perhaps, not only a vindication for the boomer generation, but its greatest achievement.

Now about Hillary's tearing up. The obvious explanation regarding the potency of her emotional display is that she allowed herself to have a real moment; she reached out through her tears and connected with the boomer woman's heart, who turned out in

droves to hand her victory in New Hampshire. (Nearly half of all voters in the New Hampshire primaries were 50+, and it was women 40+ who really turned out for Hillary.)

But again, viewed from the social scientist's perspective, there's even more to this moment than meets the hankie. Hillary's message was not that she was upset about losing to Obama. She said she was upset about the possibility of not having the opportunity to serve her country as president. And the boomers believed her—and given the high percentage of boomers and older who voted for her on Super Tuesday—they still do. They responded not out of empathy or pity, but out of a sense of wanting to restore the right order of things.

In plain English, per Erikson, the societal zeitgeist unconsciously recognized that there is the right time and place for the parental generation to step out of the way to allow the next generation to come into its own. And the days after Iowa, somewhere in New Hampshire, was not it. Neither is today the day, where in the language of generativity, on the spectrum between ceding too much power and too little, there is somewhere between a happy balance and an “epic struggle” where the work of potent change can most readily be accomplished.

Taking an even deeper dive into the adult development literature—it turns out that true generativity has nothing to do with graciously stepping aside. Another expert, D.W. Winnicott, puts it like this. Growing up is an inherently aggressive act. Metaphorically speaking: “if the child is to become adult, then this move is achieved over the dead body of an adult...Somewhere in the background is a life-and-death struggle.’

When Hillary welled up, she was crying out to the Fates with all her body, heart and soul with nearly Shakespearian pathos to announce that she is not yet finished. In doing so, she spoke for her generation of boomers—who, after all, still control leadership of virtually every major corporation, political office and organization in the country--and who will continue to dominate American society for at least another election cycle or two.

This does not mean she may not lose ultimately to Obama—or someone else, for that matter. But if she does, it will be the psychological equivalent of a murder, not an abdication. From the social scientist's point of view, this is a critical point. For in the transition from generation to generation, as Winnicott warns: “If the adult has already abdicated his position of authority, the child prematurely becomes a pseudo- adult.” The opportunity for true societal transformation is derailed if the parental generation simply gives up and leaves the stage with too limp a fight.

It is the struggle that will make Obama and his youthful followers strong. In a healthy society, eventually the parental generation will be surpassed. Maybe even in time for the November election. Just not quite yet.