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12-16-2009

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### WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Haenicke, Diether, "Each generation carries greatness within it" (2009). *WMU President Diether Haenicke*. 17.

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## Each generation carries greatness within it

*By Diether Haenicke*  
*December 16, 2009*

I frequently observe situations that would have been inconceivable when I was young.

For example, in my days a student never challenged a teacher over a grade. When my professors gave me a B, I would not have thought of going to their office to argue for an A. The professor evaluated my work, no one else; a B was a B; and there was no argument or negotiation between student and professor.

Older generations often bemoan the changes that inevitably occur as generations follow one another. Each generation tends to think of its own youth as the good old days, and it recalls them with equal amounts of nostalgia and gilded memories. Gilded, because not everything was as golden as it is later lovingly remembered. Each generation probably has its relative strengths and its shortcomings, and whoever compares different age groups should bear that in mind.

Sociologists, psychologists and popular writers have long attempted to bundle such age groups together, find common characteristics for them, and label them with a catchy moniker. We have, in recent years, read much about the Greatest Generation, a cohort born roughly between 1910 and 1924, who stormed the beaches of Normandy, won the war, got married early and built stable families with one breadwinner, took hard work for granted and accepted the small pleasures of life as its reward. Quiet heroes, salt-of-the-earth people and the grandparents of the young people who now argue with professors about their grades.

The Greatest Generation begat the baby boomers. After World War II, in a period of increased birth rates, from roughly 1946 to 1964, 76 million American children were born, who now hold most of our country's wealth, are beginning to retire and will soon need increased medical services after having bought second and third homes in the sunnier, warmer parts of the United States. The boomers were the first generation

raised on television, and they watched on this medium not only “Father knows Best” and “Leave it to Beaver” but also the Vietnam War, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the walk on the moon, the Beatles and Watergate.

Right now, the talk is about the Millennials, a cohort born between 1980 and 2000, the first members of which are just now beginning to graduate from college. Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University, calls them the most narcissistic generation on campus ever. She defines narcissism as excessive vanity and sense of entitlement.

Twenge observes that these are children whose schools and parents drove them into the "self-esteem movement" which tried hard to build the children's confidence in themselves. And indeed, American youngsters in worldwide comparative studies are seldom in the top 10 percent of any academic subject but rule supreme in self-confidence.

This cohort is also called the Internet Generation, and most of them, given the choice to live without TV or a computer, would rather give up the TV. Their social interaction takes place largely on the Internet in MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, and Flickr, which all stoke the users' tendencies toward self-love and narcissism. They have been told from kindergarten on that they are "special," and their parents coddle them and stay intimately involved in their lives longer than many think is good for the youngsters.

As babies, they traveled in cars with bumper stickers reading "Baby on Board," and "Have you hugged your child today?" Parents of this generation have been, generally speaking, advocates for their kids: they challenged or sued their children's high school teachers, negotiated with the soccer coach and they certainly come along to college orientation programs.

The Millennials have high expectations for themselves, no doubt about that. But they also have, so I observe daily, very commendable qualities. They can work collaboratively and in teams. They are positive in their approach to life and technically very savvy. Very many of them volunteer in their larger communities. They embrace multiculturalism and globalism with greater verve than preceding generations.

My prediction is that, in spite of their occasional narcissistic tendencies, they will do just as well as any generation before them. In fact, I believe that they will surprise all those who long for the good old days that perhaps never were.

*This column was first published March 14, 2007 in the Kalamazoo Gazette  
[mlive.com/kalamazoo](http://mlive.com/kalamazoo)*