

# THE NEW FUTURE: WHAT'S DRIVING AN INVISIBLE MOVEMENT THAT WILL CHANGE EVERYTHING.

by Will Marrè

The background music in today's society is changing. The emotional environment is shifting. The content of our conversations is changing. All of this seems to be driven by the convergence of five powerful factors that are pumping through our culture at the same time.

1 First, *Americans' confidence in their future is at an all time low.* Since social scientists have been measuring trends there has never been a time when confidence in the future has been more in question. Never before has there been such a universal lack of confidence about the future of our society. According to social researcher, Daniel Yankelovich, there is a pervasive lack of certainty, an absence of positive optimism about the four things that give us confidence about our future. 86% of the American public feel uncertain about the future quality of life. 84% are uncertain about having a robust, growing economy. 87% feel uncertain we will have adequate personal or national security and 90% of us have significant concern about the quality of the environment. These numbers are not trivial. It is unusual for social research to contain such extreme, concentrated levels of opinion about any subject, let alone the subjects that determine the feeling of our well-being.

2 Second, there has been an *absolute decline in the middle class.* If the middle class is defined as people earning between \$35,000 to \$90,000 per year, this is part of our country that is shrinking. Millions of people have been thrown under the poverty line in the last four years, now constituting nearly 33 million Americans. While the other fast-growing segment of the economic pie are earners making \$150,000 or more. This polarization of wealth, combined with the escalation of the cost of education, which has traditionally been the *path* to wealth, is cutting at the emotional fabric of our country.



Our founding fathers and the centuries of immigrants coming to America set out to escape societies with a bloated aristocracy and despairing peasants. Increasingly, people are concerned that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is giving us simply a newer version of that older story. This decline of the middle class has left tens of million of Americans concerned daily about the affordability of health care, their personal stake in the economy as well as their safety and security.

In research conducted by Wirthlin Worldwide, more Americans are experiencing extreme emotions. Words like anger, despair, and outrage are appearing in their research in record numbers.

3 Third, there is a *crisis of leadership.* Americans have experienced leadership failure in all the major institutions of society. Presidents lie. CEO's cheat. Priests abuse. Neither our political, business nor religious leaders have credibility. In a recent Harris Poll, only 20% of workers believe either their immediate supervisor or their organization's CEO would make decisions consistent with their espoused values in matters of consequence. Wirthlin's research revealed a deep gulf between the leadership class of America and the rest of us.

In a pre-election poll, 69% of Fortune 500 CEO's felt strongly that the country was heading in the right direction, while 71% of rank and file voters felt the country was headed in the wrong direction, regardless of whom they favored as President.

4 Fourth, *we know what happiness is and our society is not designed to produce it.* For the first time in history, social science has cracked the code on the formula for happiness. 200 years after Thomas Jefferson penned the inspiring words that human beings were entitled to pursue happiness, we finally know what that means.



Well over 500 research studies have been performed in the last decade, in the fast growing discipline known as Positive Psychology. These studies have taken place in virtually every country in the world and are very revealing. We know that on average married people are twice as happy as unmarried people. People who believe in God and attend church regularly are happier than those that don't. And people who feel a sense of control over their own choices are happier than those who either live in countries without political freedom or work in companies characterized by a choking bureaucracy.

We have also found that in America, it takes about a \$50,000/year income to feel personally secure. That is, that you can afford food, shelter, transportation and health care. At the same time, we find that making more than \$50,000 only marginally

adds to happiness or feelings of contentment.

We have learned that commuting is the most stressful activity of an American's life and that the length of time of commuting and its stresses are growing daily. We also know that the fastest growing segment of commuters are those who travel 90 minutes one way to work.

We have also learned that power and status contribute virtually nothing to happiness. There is a growing feeling that the world we have set up in the last 50 years is designed to maximize conditions that either create stress or distract us from happiness. Since 1950, our per capita income has increased 400% and depression increased by 10 times.

5 Fifth, *social trends are moving in a brand new direction.* There are 126 million Americans between the ages of 15 and 40. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century generation – Gen21. They are the children of Baby Boomers. Although market researchers have tried to slice and dice this group into Generations X, Y, Z or Millennials, Echo Boomers, etc., it is perhaps more useful to see them as children of the same generation, living in their birth order.

Generation X – thirty- to forty-year-olds – are skeptical because they feel the most betrayed.

Generation Y – twenty- to thirty-year-olds – are realistic. They feel empowered because through the Internet, they can learn the truth about anything.

Generation Z – The youngest generation, teenagers, are optimistic. They've grown up in Boomer World and have attitudes that are more likely to lead to lives that produce happiness than their older brothers and sisters – and certainly their parents. The big news is that our children are not *us* in development. The things they value the most are relationships, meaning and quality of life.

They are not interested in paying their dues, because there is no club they are trying to join. They want meaningful work that offers fair rewards. They want time for themselves, for their families and would much rather spend money on enriching experiences than stuff.

They are sincerely interested in creating the new kind of society. One that goes beyond the limits or assumptions of Boomer World. One that is more inclusive, more collaborative, secure, flexible and more meaningful.

Very unlike the Boomer stereotype of their children, this generation is confident, demanding, intelligent and driven. They simply have different goals.

These five forces have come together like a perfect storm. Invisible, but immense. The start of a movement. The winds are being whipped by refugees of Boomer World, 50+ aged people, who have achieved success but not happiness. People who have a rich life, but not necessarily a good one.

Together, this group – Gen21 and reformed Boomers – are changing the national discussion and changing our priorities. They will define who succeeds and who is marginalized in the future. ■

## If You Want to Get Involved...

This movement is the energy of the American Dream Project, an online think tank to discuss these trends, document their impact and provide a forum for leaders of the future who will find the ideas, tools and relationships they need to create the next chapter in American history.