Digital Natives—Ministry Immigrants

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Summary
In order to work with Millennials, formators and supervisors are intivited by the authors to examine their own generational gifts and their shadows? How do they intersect with those of other generations? How can I love and serve faithfully across the differences?

Introduction

Overwhelmed. Overconnected. Overprotected. Overserved. Tim Elmore[1] uses these four terms to describe persons born between 1982 and 2000: the Millennials. Other researchers lift up less negative terms: confident, self-expressive, questioning, open to diversity, high achievers and open to change.[2] While it is naïve to ascribe blindly a set of traits to an entire generation, the portrayal of this generation by Elmore and others, while not ideologically uniform, leaves little doubt that we are in the midst of a disorienting era in theological education. Moreover, this is a liminal moment for all gen-

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erations, rife with the need to constantly learn, reassess, and reorient themselves to an increasingly complex world.

Millennials began entering our seminaries in the early 2000s and quickly became a significant cohort. Colleagues in our guild, Presbyterian and Reformed Theological Field Educators, began noticing behaviors and attitudes of many of these younger students that were a departure from those of the typical student cohorts in the last twenty years. At the same time, we recognized that most of us are Baby Boomers and that we were most likely participants in a venerable rite of passage in which elders bemoan the culture and behavior of the younger generation. Rite of passage or not, we acknowledged our experiences of confusion, frustration, (righteous) indignation, and even helplessness in our efforts to navigate the Millennial waters. We also sought—and continue to seek—meaning. What does right relationship between generations look like? How do we prepare GenX and Boomer supervisors to mentor millennial students? How do we help them prepare the Millennials for the Church that is and the Church as it is becoming?

Millennials in Context

Chris

Reflection on ministry is central to the task of theological education in general and to field education specifically. Anecdotal evidence from supervisors and from our own personal experiences in the classroom raises concerns about the critical reflection skills of Millennials, also known as "Digital Natives."

Thirty-three-year-old Chris is interning at a medium-sized urban congregation. He has been actively involved in the social justice committee's prison ministry since the internship began five months ago. His supervisor writes:

> Chris asked to reschedule our supervisory conference twice this week. When we finally met on Thursday, he mentioned that he had not prepared the seminary's case study assignment that was due Friday—the next day! He told me that he could not think of anything that had happened that was significant enough to write about! When he finally recalled an incident that had occurred during his visit to the prison—he observed serious overcrowding and experienced temperatures in excess of 90 degrees on the inside—he struggled to connect this to anything even remotely related to ministry or theology.

The ability to identify content for reflection is only the first step. Reflection *on* the event can be equally challenging as this requires the capacity to recall, imagine, and use higher level thinking skills—all of which may be impacted in this "overconnected," google-the-answer generation. Some studies in the science of neuroplasticity suggest that extensive use of visual technology involving long periods of hyperfocusing, such as during video gaming, may actually create physiological changes in the brain.[3] Patricia M. Greenfield, Professor of Psychology at UCLA writes:

> By their very nature as a real-time medium, action video games penalize the player who stops to reflect. Indeed, no real-time medium—including film, television, and radio—permits time to reflect. The one communication technology that does provide time to reflect is the written word. Indeed, we have known for more than 40 years that there is an association between reading skill and reflection…[4]

Asking a young seminarian to reflect on a ministry experience may come across as a vague, abstract request that seems countercultural to millennial patterns of thinking, i.e., broad rather than deep. Seminaries generally supply students and supervisors with models for theological reflection that provide focal points for conversation about ministry, typically with guiding questions. Connecting the reflection to the student's experience and values is another effective technique for engaging Millennials in reflective dialogue.

Natalie

Millennials tend to approach learning from a need-to-know basis. Dr. Jean Twenge, psychology professor at San Diego State University, observes that their modus operandi appears to be, "Never just do what an adult asks. Always ask, 'Why.'"[5] A propensity to question the immediate practicality of information can be interpreted by their Boomer and GenX supervisors as disrespect or worse, insubordination, depending on the willingness to engage in constructive conversation around the topic.

Natalie is serving as a pastoral intern in a large, urban, multi-cultural congregation. The congregation has undergone significant growth in the past 10 years and is anticipating a huge celebration of its 125th anniversary. In communication with the seminary field education director, both the Boomer pastor/supervisor and Natalie have expressed satisfaction in their working relationship. The supervisor relates this experience:

> Natalie has been our intern for almost nine months. She has connected well with our young families and their children and has contributed to the

development of a burgeoning children's ministry. She occasionally visits some of our elderly members in their homes even though she is quite reticent about visiting on her own.

As we were preparing for our 125th anniversary celebration, I asked her to create a map that would be posted on a bulletin board outside the education building where it would be quite visible to visitors and members on that special Sunday. I suggested that it would be nice for her to use different colored pushpins to indicate where our people lived—showing at a glance where they come from to join us on Sunday morning. I also encouraged her to connect with our elderly members to find out about their current communities (assisted living, nursing homes, etc.) and to include those places on our map. I left her on her own to do the research and follow-through.

A week before the celebration, I asked Natalie how her work was going. I noticed her embarrassment as she admitted that she had chosen not to make the map. I was stunned and confused that she would deliberately decide to not follow-through on what I thought would be a fun project for her.

Generation-conscious mentors will recognize that Millennials will engage when they connect an assignment with a purpose or cause that they value. Natalie had most of the "why," but the creation of a hard-copy map on a poster did not seem to carry the weight of importance. We also found Natalie's lack of response to her supervisor's request to be significant. There has been much written about Millennial's lack of conflict negotiation skills. Whether this is due to helicopter parents who tended to navigate all of their children's problems for them or to something else, we have observed that our younger students often do struggle to address conflicts directly and in a healthy way.

Shante and Jay

In the book *Millennials Go to College*, Neil Howe and William Strauss suggest that institutions of higher learning would be well-served to recognize that safety is a key expectation of Millennials.[6] Beyond physical safety and healthcare, this presumption of safety finds its way into the classroom and the field setting as faculty and supervisors may experience more complaints about perceived unfair grades, biased values, or anything else that millennial students may perceive to be a violation of the student-authority covenant.

Wanda, a Boomer field educator, teaches a required course taken concurrently with the field placement in her seminary. The students in this

course are diverse in many ways and span three generations. She shares this experience of a recent class:

> A nationally recognized pastor and religious leader served as a guest lecturer for a class required of all field studies students. This pastor engaged the topic of the evening with deep theological insights wedded to practical ministerial experiences. It was an evening rich with personal, theological, pastoral, and biblical reflection. As is the case sometimes with guest speakers, the lecture time allotment was exceeded, partly due to an enthusiastic question and answer period. The second scheduled activity—peer reflection groups—had to be postponed to the next class session.

> During the next class session, I led a brief time of reflection on our guest's presentation. While there was much gratitude for the insights, wisdom and commitment to transformational ministry of this recognized, respected pastor and theologian, two additional interactions were notable. The first was a young woman in her twenties, Shante, who spoke with annoyance if not anger: "You know, four of us had prepared for peer reflection groups and because plenary went overtime we didn't get to present what we had prepared."

> The second involved Millennial student Jay, who remarked what an incredible evening it had been. (He had even tweeted about the extraordinary guest presenter.) Jay added, "This was really incredible and I could have listened all night. I learned so much, but what did you want me to learn?" I was somewhat dumbfounded and replied: "My assumptions are that you are adult learners. You had the topic and the readings for preparation and a guest presenter who addressed the topic in depth. I assume that you will learn what you need to know." Jay's response: "Oh, well, it helps to know your assumptions. I just don't know what you want us to learn."

Each contributor to this article has experienced something similar in our work with students. We've been challenged about grades, criticized for unclear syllabi, and pressed for clarity about expectations for assignments. Not all of this is unwarranted, of course, and constructive critique is welcome and beneficial. Our concern surfaces when we experience the critique arising from a lack of flexibility or adaptability to changing circumstances, characteristics that are critical to the work of ministry.

Supervisors can anticipate annoyance from interns when things don't go as planned. The anxiousness displayed by Shante and Jay reflect two commonly identified Millennial traits. In Shante's case, expectation of safety manifested as frustration over a perceived breech in the teacher-student cov-

enant, and for Jay, intense pressure to achieve academically, and the expectation that the teacher will ensure that happens.

Abigail

Generational research suggests that Millennials have a more relaxed work ethic than their elders.[7] Their desire for a healthy work/life balance can result in decision-making that can baffle their older supervisors, e.g., the student intern who chose to skip the Wednesday night fellowship program at church that she was supposed to lead. Her reason? She was tired.

Millennials are also known to be masters of self-expression. They are tattooed and pierced at rates that far exceed those of other generations and social networking is the norm. A marketing research firm notes, "For Millennials, everything is about 'real' and 'reality' and their knowledge and information empowers them."[8]

On a crisp October day, 25-year-old student intern Abigail was to meet her 45-year-old GenX supervisor Reverend Torres at an upscale retirement home to conduct pastoral visits with church members who were residents. Rev. Torres writes:

> At our supervisory conference the day before, we had focused on the purpose and dynamics of pastoral care to aging members. This was going to be Abigail's first pastoral visit, so I was concerned that she needed some background on the members we were going to visit and some idea of the types of spiritual issues that seniors might be dealing with.
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> I got to the Legacy a few minutes early and sat down in the lobby. About twenty minutes later I saw Abigail rushing up the front steps two at a time. She slowed down once she got indoors and apologized for being a few minutes late. She had been playing Ultimate Frisbee at the seminary and the game had ended late.
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> I was surprised to see that her hair was wet. But more alarming than that was her choice of attire for the afternoon pastoral visits: flip-flops, t-shirt, and torn jeans.

Our GenX supervisor assumed that the best use of time in the supervisory conference was to discuss pastoral care issues. After all, dressing appropriately for pastoral calls is common knowledge—right? Wrong. We all operate out of our own schemas, and as an "emerging adult"[9] Abigail has not yet fully grasped that her self-expression via choice of attire might need to be adjusted to meet a larger cultural norm. Effective mentoring is the bridge that can introduce young adults to this kind of unfamiliar territory.

Sam

From the time they were children, Millennials have been encouraged to express their opinions, needs, and desires. Supervisors and field educators are likely to find themselves on the receiving end of these messages and they can expect the vast majority of them to be communicated via technology.

Sam is an intern at Boomer pastor Helen Jones' church. He is a full-time student, has two part-time jobs, and is involved in several student initiatives on campus. Sam has recently returned from a seminary-sponsored travel seminar to Guatemala. Reverend Jones writes:

> On Saturday morning I discovered an email from Sam that he had sent at 10:30 PM the night before. Here is an excerpt from the message: "As you know, I got back from Guatemala four days ago. I have been working non-stop to try and catch up. I've gotten extensions from two of my professors for assignments that are due Monday. I am not able to sustain myself under this stress. There is no way that I'm going to be prepared to teach the adult Sunday school class on Sunday."

> Because I didn't respond immediately, I guess, he sent me three more emails wanting to know how I was going to handle the class situation.

Sam is experiencing great stress due to schedule and time over-commitment, and his stress is shared by his supervisor who was astonished and frustrated by the intern's impatience to receive an answer. Millennials have grown up accustomed to having their lives choreographed by helicopter parents; it's the life they know and it continues into young adulthood. Their need to succeed has led to an emphasis on planning, and they carefully schedule their days to extract maximum benefit.

A 2012 US Census Bureau report figure showed that 82 percent of graduate students work while attending school, with nearly half of graduate students working full-time.[10] It is not uncommon for today's seminarians to work—even as they are engaged in internships. Millennials are likely to expect their Boomer and GenX supervisors to be understanding and flexible when, rather than meeting an internship responsibility, they choose to engage in an activity that they deem a "higher calling"—such as a mission trip or a work schedule.

Conclusion

Generational research is not monolithic in its findings, and categorizations of individuals are fraught with exceptions. Some Boomers are tech savvy, some GenXers are workaholics, and some Millennials don't use social me-

dia. Imperfect as research may be, choosing to dismiss generational differences will lead to missed opportunities to enhance educational practices, communication, and interpersonal relationships. Rather than getting caught in the morass of despair or a culture of complaint, we have the opportunity to approach generational challenges by re-envisioning and reframing our work as educators, supervisors, and mentors.

Theologian Dr. Sharon Daloz Parks summarizes the central work of Millennials in this way:

> The promise and vulnerability of emerging adulthood lie in the experience of the birth of critical awareness and consequently in the dissolution and recomposition of the meaning of self, other, world, and 'God.' (It) is rightfully a time of asking big questions and crafting worthy dreams.[11]

She advocates for a recommitment to mentoring in order to "significantly revitalize our institutions and provide the intergenerational glue to address some of our deepest and most pervasive concerns.[12]

Our vocation as field educators, supervisors, and mentors is perhaps more critical today than ever before. Classroom and mentoring strategies must be re-evaluated in light of the liminal time in which we are living—a task that requires that we honestly address these questions: What are my own generational gifts and their shadows? How do they intersect with those of other generations? How can I love and serve faithfully across the differences?

NOTES

1. Tim Elmore, *Generation iY: Our Last Chance to Save Their Future*, forward by Dan Cathy (Atlanta, GA: Poet Gardener Publishing, 2010).

2. For example, see the Pew Research Center, "Millenials: A Portrait of Generation Next: Confident. Connected. Open to Change" (Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010), accessed March 22, 2014, http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf.

3. Marc Prensky, "Do They Really Think Differently?" *On the Horizon* 9, no. 6 (December 2001): 5.

4. Patricia M. Greenfield, "The Changing Psychology of Culture From 1800 Through 2000," *Psychological Science* 24, no. 9 (2013): 1722–1731.

5. Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 25.

6. Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Go to College* (Washington, DC: AACRAO and Life Course Associates, 2003), 51.

7. Pew Research Center, "Millenials," 15, accessed March 22, 2014, http://www.pewso-cialtrends.org/files/2010/10/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf.

8 . The Hartman Group, "Marketing to Millennials," *Hartbeat* (Bellevue, WA: The Hartman Group, February 2, 2010), accessed March 22, 2014, http://hartbeat.hartman-group.com/article/328/Marketing-to-Millennials.

9. "Emerging adult:" is another term for Millennials; also may be referred to as delayed adolescence.

10. Jessica Davis, "Enrollment and Work Status," in *School Enrollment and Work Status: 2011: American Community Survey Briefs* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Commerce, 2012), 2, accessed March 14, 2014, www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/acsbr11-14.pdf.

11. Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2011), 8.

12. Ibid., 13–14.

THEME: THE NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE
Volume 35, 2015

In recent decades, greater attention has been given to the role and importance of story in a variety of disciplines. In psychotherapy, for example, narrative therapy has emerged as a distinctive approach to the understanding and healing of persons. Those who are responsible for the formation and supervision of religious professionals resonate with this emphasis as well. Because religious literature often comes in the form of story or narrative, the form of narrative has become a significant part of religious reflecting. Stories shape lives and narratives provide the framework for the human journey.

Volume 35 of *Reflective Practice*, (including 25 volumes of *Journal of Supervision and Training in Ministry*), will examine the use of narrative around these questions: "How has this emphasis on narrative shaped, or even re-shaped, our work as a theological educators, ministerial supervisors, or spiritual mentors? How do we employ story in the work of formation and supervision? How might students be encouraged to self-reflect critically on the stories they tell in ministerial formation? How does the multicultural and diverse religious perspectives of our age interface with this emphasis upon the narrative?" Articles around this theme, as well as essays outside the theme, are welcome.