

May 29, 2021

Dear Ezra Klein,

I enjoyed listening to your podcast entitled “Did the Boomers Ruin America?”; but, as a 71-year-old former flower child, student civil rights, Black Power, anti-war and Women’s and Gay Rights activist, I don’t think either of the Boomer critics—and the people whose feelings they reflect—have adequately considered all the positive contributions my generation has made to modern culture. I suggest that the derogatory phrase “OK, Boomer” be replaced with a heartfelt “Thanks, Boomer” for the numerous gifts we tend to take for granted.

My adult daughter never questioned for a moment that she could become the Operating Engineer that she is today, skilled in all manner of trade school teachings that were not available to female students in the 60s when I went to High School. Then, I was not allowed to take anything other than Home Economics or Jewelry Making in that part of my High School’s curriculum. Need I even add that, throughout my K-12 schooling, I could never wear pants to school? During blizzards, girls would wear them under our required skirts or dresses and have to take them off before entering the classroom. More importantly (although the constrictions of dress codes are significant and were totally upended by the Boomers, to the degree that I don’t think most younger people realize when they put on their jeans, Tees and sweats as if it had always been possible to live so comfortably in clothing), when being assessed for possible occupations at that time, scores were graded differently for boys and for girls, and jobs were listed as being intended some for males and others for females. Gay people were mostly closeted, transfolk invisible, and non-binary people peed in their pants (or skirts) on the way home from schools in which they could not feel comfortable in the strictly assigned by supposed gender bathrooms. Similarly, my son, who studied ballet in between stints at softball and fencing, never considered—or cared—that some might see his ballet interests as not masculine. Such a choice, in my own childhood, would have gotten him laughed out of the schoolyard. So many opportunities, dare I say freedoms, that are taken for granted these days, were not available before we Boomers, then known as Hippies and Flower Children, broke with convention and protested at conventions in the 1960s and 70s. Who do you think is responsible for the change in rules and regulations about such matters? Who closed down universities, highways, and the Golden Gate Bridge to end wars, achieve voting rights, have AIDS medication made available? Who broke glass ceilings? Did Boomers ruin everything? Yes, if by everything you mean an even more violent, more sexist, more racist, and more restrictive personal style allowances than now exist. We broke open the world as far as I have experienced it—and we are all better off for that.

Your guest, Helen Andrews, suggested that while she thought that French and German students of the 60s had good reason to revolt, because many of their parents had been Nazis and they had suffered some post-war deprivations, she couldn’t see why American students at that time needed to confront their elders, when they were the children of the Holocaust’s saviors and had pretty cushy lifestyles, many of them raised in the lawned suburban landscapes of privilege and pleasure. In essence, she thought that American student revolutionaries had nothing to complain about. But what about those who were being drafted and sent to fight in another war (Vietnam) where many didn’t believe there was anyone to save? How about those same LGBTQ people noted above who couldn’t come out to or be free with their parents? How about those whose parents were racists, if not Nazis, and objected with complete ostracization when we brought home partners of different races, genders or even religions than we’d been instructed to? How about those of us who didn’t want to stuff our bodies into bras and girdles and take jobs as secretaries because those were the only ones listed for women.

It seems like the generations that followed us take a lot of what we’ve bestowed upon them for granted. Not only do most folk put on their jeans and sweats each day for whatever they want to do, but they embrace technology without crediting the Boomers who provided the smart phones and laptops and Ipads that are the mainstay of current life. Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, among so many other innovators of how we live today, were both Boomers. When I wrote papers for college, we used White Out liquid to correct mistakes, and if there were too many of them, we retyped the whole page. We got our information from physically going to the library or, if we were lucky, from the encyclopedias our parents bought on layaway plans.

My now 41-year-old son is alive today because Boomer doctors advanced the chances of living through Childhood Leukemia from virtually nil in the 1960s to the 70% prognosis he had in the ‘90s to more than 80% today. Of course, many of those medical people were of The Great Generation that preceded us, but I think Boomer

contributions have been pretty great too. My father died of heart valve problems that are fixable today, and kids dealing now with the kind of extreme spinal curvature I've long lived with, now impacting my breathing, could have their scoliosis straightened early in life by techniques devised by my Boomer colleagues.

And c'mon.... What about our music?! At my, thank goodness, recently reopened community swimming pool, where most of the therapeutic swimmers are old, but the lifeguards are young, the music the latter generally play for themselves is Motown, Folk Music, Classic Rock, The Beatles.... Boomer music! While it is jarring to find such music, which we thought revolutionary at the time, now playing in elevators and while waiting on the phone, it was transformational, awakened, alive, and still gets most everyone out of their chairs to dance wherever it is played or performed. Before the pandemic, I was taking a class every Saturday at my local Y called Boomercize.

While environmental degradation may indeed be worsening, I don't think it fair to blame Boomers alone for it, as it was we who set the stage for environmental activism. We created the first Earth Day and began the trend toward eco-awareness. Many of us were eating macrobiotically in the 70s, what most think of as Vegan today but without the cool plant cheeses and spinach pesto veggie dogs available now. Members of the 60s and 70s counter-culture, a significant part of Boomerism, if not in numbers at least in intensity, were not living in individual tract homes with grass lawns and our own personal lawnmowers. Many of us lived in communes and other forms of collective/intentional communities that recognized early on the waste involved in individual ownership and started tool cooperatives as well as the more common parent-run—or at least -participation—nursery schools. Many of us continue to live with others, non-family or chosen-family members, to foster and adopt kids as I did, to consider the environmental impact every time we flush and shower, especially here in dry, fire prone, drought ridden California.

I do have younger friends and relatives who share your guests' (and presumably your) view that Boomers had it easier in many ways then and made it harder for subsequent generations, and there are some ways I'd agree that at least the former is true. We could work our way through college without incurring staggering debt, and, in the main, did not start worrying, as my daughter did with her high school job, about retirement benefits until relatively late in life. Many of us believed we'd never grow old, and if we gave that possibility any consideration, we thought the culture would be enough changed that we might not face the same kinds of illnesses and alienation that our grandparents seemed to end up with. And while we had to duck and cover under our wooden desks at school in preparation for nuclear annihilation and stock our air raid shelters with canned goods for while we waited for the air to clear (as if!)—we did know about facing catastrophe long before the pandemic—we did have something that I think is in shorter supply these days, and that is hope. Even as an at least third generation depressive, I never questioned that I could get a college education, a decent job, afford an OK place to live, and move, as I did (from NYC to Boston to SF) based on whim, not financial necessity. And I say that as the daughter of a single mother who worked as a secretary. (My father had been ill, was mostly unemployed and then died when I was 13). I was raised to be self-sufficient, to never need nor take charity and, aside from the significant benefits I received from Social Security and the GI Bill, I lived up to that instructive in a way I don't think many comparable families could today.

I've probably gone on too long already, and I've taken too long to finish this letter for it to be timely in relation to your Boomer Podcast. But I needed to say what I did, and hopefully it's had some meaning to whoever reads it.

Sincerely,

Sheila Koren