Blurred Line - A rambling on a challenge in education.

Mike Bownes – August/September 2016

"Rob, there's a line, and you have just crossed it" – is a statement that will live long in the fond memories of the schoolfriends of Rob who were present when it was made. I'm sure that at reunions of this group, particularly with Stu, my former colleague present, it will be a tale regaled with much mirth. Stu was the teacher at the time rebuking Rob. However, doing so with gesticulations and actually stepping over the imaginary line he had drawn on the ground is the cause of this incident of some 15 years ago being deeply imbedded in the memories of this group of friends.

This memory was poignantly brought to mind recently in a series of focus groups held at my current school around the topic of character education. Poignant because from my perspective, based on my perceptions and experiences, that line has morphed into two and the divide between is widening. That gap is akin to a generation gap, immortalized in society through the ages, often humourously manifested through anecdotes about musical tastes.

Now, however; and again I must stress in my opinion; that gap spans across far more serious issues than musical preference, but spans across, significantly, morality and ethics – the foundation stones of character education. This statement actually highlights the crux of this rambling of mine, namely what is morality, ethics and good character and who or what are custodians of these societal essentials?

This is no new revolutionary question. In fact it is as old as time itself. However, contextualizing my rambling, I ask it within the terms of the boys only, full boarding school that I currently teach and am Housemaster of one of 8 boarding houses each with 70 boys on average. I believe that the 8 Housemasters are at the forefront of character education in the school and it is on this premise that I deliberate the "blurred line".

Where is it? This blurred line, now in my reality, is two lines with blurred perspectives in between. It exists in our own perceptions and, dare I say, expectations each generation has of each other. Media and now more significantly, social media platforms have the major influences on this, particularly the ever-increasing divide between the generations.

Of course, the huge generation gap must be seen in context. The contextual reality of each societal group that experiences this generation gap in their own way is very significant. Also, it must be seen in the economic, social and spiritual context of each scenario. For me, my spiritual context is particularly relevant and is one of the main reasons I see the line as blurred because I believe society becoming increasingly amoral rather than 'merely' seeing a decline in universally accepted morality. A strong opinion indeed but one that is probably best explored in another rambling.

In a little research, I encountered a few papers that addressed economic issues and challenges facing the younger generations and shed some light on the matter for me. Particularly, it is highlighted in an article by Joseph E Stiglitz. He says:

> *These three realities – social injustice on an unprecedented scale, massive inequities and a loss of trust in elites – define our political moment, and rightly so.*

Servanthood, something we espouse and expect the youth to also embrace is only paid mere lip service – we oldies perceive the self-centeredness of this generation to be at the heart of the generation chasm. However, one of the reasons is their perception of the economic challenges they face. They see where we are and how, as we expected or perhaps anticipated, but certainly strove for, have become better off than our parents. Stiglitz highlights the challenges the younger generation face :

> *Today, the expectations of young people, wherever they are in the income distribution, are the opposite.*
> *They face job insecurity throughout their lives. On average, many college graduates will search for months before they find a job – often only after having taken one or two unpaid internships.*
> *And they count themselves lucky, because they know that their poorer counterparts, some of whom did better in school, cannot afford to spend a year or two without income, and do not have the connections to get an internship in the first place.*
> *Today's young university graduates are burdened with debt – the poorer they are, the more they owe. So, they do not ask what job they would like; they simply ask what job will enable them to pay their college loans, which often will burden them for 20 years or more.*
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> *Likewise, buying a home is a distant dream.*
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> *These struggles mean that young people are not thinking much about retirement. If they did, they would only be frightened by how much they will need to accumulate to live a decent life (beyond bare social security), given the likely persistence of rock-bottom interest rates.*
> *In short, today's young people view the world through the lens of inter-generational fairness. The children of the upper-middle- class may do well in the end, because they will inherit wealth from their parents.*
> *While they may not like this kind of dependence, they dislike even more the alternative: a 'fresh start' in which the cards are stacked against their attainment of anything approaching what was once viewed as a basic middle-class lifestyle.*
> *These inequities cannot easily be explained away. It isn't as if these young people didn't work hard: these hardships affect those who spent long hours studying, excelled in school and did everything "right."*
> *The sense of social injustice – that the economic game is rigged – is enhanced as they see the bankers who brought on the financial crisis, the cause of the economy's continuing malaise, walk away with mega-bonuses, with almost no one being held accountable for their wrongdoing.*
> *Massive fraud was committed, but somehow, no one actually perpetrated it. Political elites promised that 'reforms' would bring unprecedented prosperity. And they did, but only for the top 1%. Everyone else, including the young, got unprecedented insecurity.*

While this is very much an American context, the relevance to our South African reality seemed very applicable and perhaps poignant to me especially in our current socio-political context.

So while our generation expects them to follow our line, as blurred as that may be, they really are focused on their own insecurity in the fullest sense of the word. Our expectations then are perhaps for them to be like us, to do things the way we did. However, we are asking that from a different historical (especially economic) context. We had a secure base from which to launch our quest to have a better life (perhaps a more comfortable life) than our parents; this generation, of whom we are so critical in their self-centeredness, have a very different base, an insecure economic base from which they are able to launch their quest. In

South Africa, the political milieu, which does, in my opinion exacerbate the economic difficulty, just adds greater insecurity to the Millennials and iGen's.

We no longer are playing the same game, let alone finding ourselves on the same playing field. That's actually okay as long we recognize that and remain confident that we still have the same goal – doing our bit to create a society or environment within which we can exercise our right to live and to strive, but not at the ruthless expense of others. It means we must communicate, communicate with dignity, integrity and sincere intentions. Also we need a sincere appreciation and respect of differences. We need dialogue and discussion, ensuring we don't only talk but also do – and do with the best interests of our societal reality at heart.

Nikita Ramkissoon in *Mind the (generation) gap,* articulates this so well:

> *All we can with the generation gap is be patient, turn it down, but make sure there is never silence.*
> ***That would be the crime of the century.*** (own emphasis)

REFERENCES

American Morality: Is There a Generation Gap? - Heather Mason Kiefer, Contributing Editor – gallup.com 9 March 2004

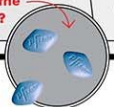There's a global morality gap — and it's getting wider
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GENERATION GAPS

By BRUCE FEIRSTEIN

GENERATION	iGEN	MILLENNIALS	GEN X	BABY-BOOMERS	GREATEST GENERATION
YEAR OF BIRTH	After 2000	1980–2000	1965–1979	1946–1964	Before the end of W.W. II
WHICH MAKES THEM HOW OLD?	0–14	15–35	36–50	51–69 (but they lie)	70 +
LIFE-ALTERING EVENT	Release of the iPhone 6	Free Wi-Fi	9/11	First time they tried pot	First time they laid eyes on a '55 Ford Thunderbird
CURRENT LIVING SITUATION	Down the hall from Mom and Dad	Sharing an apartment in Brooklyn	Priced out of Brooklyn, considering Los Angeles	Back in the city, baby!	Using a reverse mortgage to provide shelter for feckless offspring
HOW DO THEY GET AROUND?	Mom's Prius	Lyft	Handmade Dutch bicycle	Soon-to-be-repossessed BMW	Dreaming about that '55 T-Bird
TRUSTED NEWS SOURCE	YouTube	Twitter	John Oliver	~~Dan Rather~~ ~~Brian Williams~~	Dead trees
PREFERRED MODE OF COMMUNICATION	Snapchat	Selfies	Text	Lawsuits	Guilt-inducing phone calls
ICON	Ariana Grande	Mark Zuckerberg	Kurt Cobain	Howard Stern	Harry Truman
SOCIAL NETWORK THEY ABANDONED FACEBOOK FOR	Instagram	Tinder	LinkedIn	Match.com	The Rotary Club
ENTERTAINMENT EXPENDITURE	$26.95 on Minecraft	$900 on Coachella	$2,000 on Burning Man	$5,000 on "Platinum" tix to the Rolling Stones	$35 on Oklahoma at community dinner theater
MONEY-DRAINING ADDICTION	Mobile-game upgrades	Limited-edition Nikes	Superhero collectibles on eBay	Second home	G.O.P. fund-raising e-mails
GET-RICH-QUICK SCHEME	Create a video game	Invent an app	Sell something to Yahoo	Flipping houses	Fracking
SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY	Being Common Core guinea pigs	Trigger warnings and micro-aggressions	Artisanal pickles	The bong	Defeating Hitler
DEFINING CONDITION	Peanut-allergic	Gluten-intolerant	Attention-deficit-disordered	Erectile-dysfunctional	Permanently aggrieved
DEEPEST FEAR	Low batteries	Everybody doesn't get a trophy?	How to pay off grad-school loans	No longer being the center of the universe	America, 2015
AND, FINALLY, THE KEY QUESTION OF THEIR LIVES	What's a landline?	What's a career?	What's the point?	Where's the Viagra?	Where the fuck did we go so very, very wrong?

SOURCE : http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/10/generation-gap-guide

(apologies for the expletive above, I could not "text box" it out - MGB)