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Ashwinikumar Singh – The Brave Shall Inherit The Earth

THE BRAVE SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH

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What could be the answers if the young from every generation were asked to pick an event that captured the zeitgeist of their youth? The Silent generation I presume would pick the Second World War. The Baby Boomers would probably choose the Apollo 11 mission and the Generation X would call out the collapse of the Soviet Union. My generation, the Millennials in characteristic fashion, instead of one would pick two - the 9/11 attacks and the 2008 financial crisis. The Second World War was a successful fight against the rule of tyranny, the lunar mission a remarkable feat for humanity and the downfall of the Soviet Union, a gateway to the opportunities of capitalism and liberalism. In stark contrast, the World Trade Centre attacks and the Great Recession are grim reminders of a less promising world and led to inhibition of ambition. So when the Millennials assess the legacy of the

ceding generation of leaders, it would be in this context.

The Good

It is beyond question that the human race has made significant strides in the last few decades. The world has advanced in almost all arenas and Baby Boomers and Generation Xers can take credit for much of this progress. In the last 25 years, child mortality has fallen by half from 12.8 million to 6.5 million. The percentage of global population living on less than \$ 1.25 a day has come down from 34.8 percent to ~15 percent. The number of polio incidences around the world has declined from 261,000 to 369 and it is close to being eradicated in almost every country.

The World Wide Web was invented by Tim Berners-Lee and thankfully not patented. Computers, Mobile Phones and the Internet proliferated, bringing

down barriers to communication, paving the way for the Information Age to kick in and leading to a globalized, inter-connected and inter-dependent world. The Berlin Wall was brought down and the United Nations grew from 51 members in 1945 to a 193 member organization. As per the latest report of Freedom House, the proportion of democratic countries in the world has gone up from about a quarter in 1970 to about two-thirds in 2010.

The Bad

In spite of all the progress we've made in the past, the present is far from reassuring. The global public debt stands at \$52.5 trillion. When the first boomer was born, United States government debt stood at \$228 billion. It is now \$16 trillion which is an increase of 7018 percent. Cost of education has skyrocketed in developed countries leading to student debt cros-

sing the \$1 trillion mark in the United States. According to the International Labour Organization, global unemployment rate among 15-to-24 year-olds was estimated at 12.6 percent in 2013, with 73 million people jobless worldwide. Youth unemployment stands at around 16 percent in the US but Europe fares far worse at 22.6 percent. Students face bleak employment prospects upon completion of education. It has been two decades since the end of the Cold War but there are still some 17,000 nuclear warheads across the globe. The global hunger problem still remains unsolved and yet the amount of food wasted in Europe alone can feed nearly 200 million people. Corruption, nepotism and inefficiency continue to plague political institutions in the least developed and developing countries and global governance has been below par. Freedom of speech as a fundamental right remains non-existent or stands abridged in many parts of the world.

The Ugly

An unwelcoming future is far scarier than an imperfect present. In the next 16 years, world food demand is expected to go up by 50 percent, energy demand by 45 percent and water demand by 30 percent. The lack of sustainability in human progress has put the earth's regenerative capacity under tremendous strain. An estimated 4.5 billion people globally live within 50 km of an 'impaired' water resource. Global food prices are close to their historic peaks and volatility in food prices has been accepted as the 'new normal'. Climate change and Global Warming threaten to irreversibly alter the Earth's ecosystem.

As per the Stern Review on economics of climate change, around 15-40

percent of species face potential extinction only after 2°C of warming. According to certain estimates, climate change is already wiping 1.6 percent annually from global GDP and the cost of climate change and air pollution combined is expected to increase to 3.2 percent of the global GDP by 2030. The least developed countries will have to bear a disproportionate share of this burden. The Baby Boomers might have succeeded in becoming the wealthiest generation ever but in the process they've led the Earth to its poorest in history.

Sand Goby or Lumpfish?

Pomatoschistus Minutus or the Sand Goby is a unique species of fish. It feeds on its own offspring even when there are other food alternatives. It is not my argument that both the Baby Boomers and the Generation X have practiced some metaphorical form of filial cannibalism. But no one would call them Lumpsuckers either which is another type of fish that nearly does a kamikaze protecting its to-be-born children. In spite of all the achievements of the last century, the world is faced with one of the most critical times in its history. The good of our progenitors has not outweighed the bad and the ugly. Like the world they too stand at crossroads. They could choose to maintain the status quo and go down in history as the luckiest generation having lived in a world that was peaceful, stable and wealthy. This shall be accompanied with the ignominy of having left their children and grandchildren with gargantuan problems to solve. Or they could choose to act and be remembered for helping set things right.

You cannot escape responsibility and expect someone else to fix the problem

when you control 85 percent of the world's wealth, run every major corporation and hold political office in almost every democracy of the world. Baby Boomers and Xers need to be invested in the well-being of the world and this requires a paradigm shift in outlook and thinking. Structural reforms are required in almost every aspect of human life and these decisions won't be easy ones to make. Gradual change of guard needs to be brought about to infuse young blood and new thought in political and corporate leadership. Innovation needs to be unshackled from the reins of conventional thinking and myopic agenda. Bill Gates is showing the way to his generation by not only giving away most of his wealth to tackle the most critical issues of this age but also urging his fellow billionaires to do the same.

Global and national governance institutions will have to reinvent themselves to deal with pressing issues of poverty, climate change, unemployment, inequality, social security and terrorism. The world is made up of 3.5 billion young people and half of them live in developing economies. The existing global power centres need to acknowledge this emerging reality and create room for a more balanced, consensus-driven and equitable world order. Leadership marked by moderate risk-taking in pursuance of enlightened self-interest is bound to achieve success as demonstrated in the recent US-Iran rapprochement after decades of hostility. Sacrifices will have to be made and must be made, for the cost of inaction today is going to be unprecedented and ensuing damage irreversible.

'Netions' Not Nations

"The present is theirs; the future, for which I really worked, is mine."

- Nikola Tesla

It is obvious that the world faces challenges that are so fundamental in nature that they could jeopardise its very existence. Overcoming these challenges will require changes and measures never seen in the world before. This begets an important question – Do Millennials have what it takes to act as a catalyst for enabling a transformation of this scale? Even at the risk of being accused of nurturing a generational self-serving bias, I would say "Yes". I think we do have what it takes to turn these crisis-ridden times into numerous opportunities for ourselves. Every generation has a personality and the Millennials display attributes and beliefs that are starkly different from Baby Boomers and Gen Xers and also topically desirable.

You could characterize a millennial as confident, always connected, liberal, self-expressive, optimistic and open to change. Deloitte's Annual Global Millennial Innovation Survey in 2013 yielded results that would give confidence to anyone who gives Millennials a chance. 78 percent of the Millennials believed that innovation is essential for business growth and 87 percent believe that success of a business should be measured by more than just financial performance. There are as many Millennials who believe that the purpose of business is improve society as those who believe it is to make profit. Millennials recognized education, electric power and national government as the three most important sectors in need of innovation.

Generation X might have invented the internet and the mobile phone but the Millennials are the 'mobile & internet' generation. This tech savvy cohort has a global DNA and is not shackled by national boundaries. Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities* argues that modern nation-states arose because of the proliferation of the printing press. As information dissemination became cheap, communities organized themselves along the lines of race, ethnicity and language. Now with the proliferation of the internet, Millennials are set to have their own version of *Imagined Communities* possibly organized around common set of beliefs, attitudes, value systems, ambitions and even grievances. 'Netions' and not nations will drive the internet economy and this is bound to have a profound impact on international politics, economics and societal conduct. Netions like the Bitcoin network are already challenging the status quo in the global financial system.

The Millennial Apollo Mission

In her Harvard Commencement speech, J. K. Rowling stated: "There is an expiry date on blaming your parents for steering you in the wrong direction." This could be said about blaming past generations too. Whether we like it or not, we are inheriting a model of civilization that is rooted in unsustainability. It is incumbent upon the Millennials to take stock of the situation and move towards the path of course correction. We cannot continue to follow the obscenely resource-intensive and unsustainable lifestyles of our predecessors. We cannot continue to take the planet for granted. We have to be smarter. We have to be brave. We have to take decisions and actions that those before us did not have the

courage to take.

We have been called selfish, lazy, and entitled. Let's be selfish about the planet as it is the only one we have. Let's be lazy about consuming natural resources and killing each other. Let us always feel entitled to a better Earth than the one bequeathed to us. We have the opportunity to become the new Greatest Generation every born. But it is going to be a marathon and not a sprint. We swear by innovation and entrepreneurship. Now is the time to walk the talk. Most of our challenge areas like politics, energy, education, healthcare and global governance are hungry for new ideas and wanting of innovation. Let's be change agents and truly transformative in our thinking. If we can't find jobs, why not create them? If Hamburg is not working out for us, why not try Johannesburg?

We've had our wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. We've even had our Great Recession in 2008. Now how do we make our mark in history? Send a man to Mars? I say let's get a little more ambitious. Let's begin with Earth. On May 25, 1961, John F. Kennedy announced his intention of landing a man on the moon and returning him back safely to Earth before the end of the decade. On July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were on the moon as the first humans to have set foot on a world other than Earth. Cut to 2014. 20 percent of the world's population still lacks access to electricity. How about we announce our intention of installing a light bulb, preferably a LED, in every household on this planet by the end of this decade? Yes, our very own Project Apollo: a shining moon for every house on Earth.

"I had an inheritance from my father,
It was the moon and the sun.
And though I roam all over the world,
The spending of it's never done."
- Ernest Hemingway

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