

# Does Anyone Know What Time it is?

You have to know to make things happen

by Phillip Moffitt

**A**LISON WAS born about eight months ago and Brian arrived six weeks ago, with Cleveland and Lisa in between. These babies, and quite a few more, are my friends' contributions to the so-called mini-baby boom that is written about so much these days. It struck me, while visiting one of the recent arrivals and his mother in the hospital, how very different a world these children will experience as they reach ten and seventeen and twenty-five from what their parents—all late 1940s and early 1950s babies—encountered while growing up.

**T**radition says that we should count generations by twenty-five-year spans, but more natural divisions are dictated by human events. The children who grew up in the Depression and came of age in the war years were, in life experiences, different from those born at the turn of the century; and certainly those born in the late 1940s and early 1950s, during

the baby-boom years, have had drastically different experiences than either of the two previous generations. And now we are creating a new generation. There is no point in quibbling about its exact beginning—last year or six years ago—the fact is, a new generation is here.

**I** think a great deal about this new generation. And about its parents.

**W**ill babies Brian and Alison grow up to become soldiers for wars in Central and South America? Will they grow up with the prospects of economic prosperity or with hardship? What will be their dreams for themselves and for their country? Who will be their heroes? their villains?

**A**nd their parents—do they realize that their generation, too, must search for a new dream, that there is yet another social revolution they will precipitate

that will be just as important as the changes they caused in the 1960s? Do they know that this social revolution will dramatically affect the lives of Brian and Alison?

**I**t will be the aging of America.

**A**lison and Brian will be part of the first generation to watch the over-eighty-five segment, now a small trickle of people comprising about one percent of the population, more than double by 2010. They will also witness the aging of the baby-boom generation, their parents. By 2010 nearly one quarter of the U.S. population will be over sixty-five.

**B**rian and Alison will probably just be getting started in their careers in 2010. How will this older population, dominant in number and economic clout, alter the politics, the social fabric, the very culture that Brian and

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Alison inherit? How will the baby boomers react to aging? If older people are more conservative, how will these consistently liberal people redefine conservatism? How will this segment of the population—which, by virtue of its size, its optimism, and its good fortune, has always had the power to redefine the world in its own terms—change America's housing conditions, job opportunities, and laws to suit its own needs in later life?

I hope these parents of today realize that the world has changed and the future must be regarded in a new light. In every society there comes a moment when the parenting generation must accept its responsibility not just each for his or her own offspring, but for the entire younger generation. At such a moment there evolves a new order of priorities, a sense of destiny and a vague but all-powerful dream for the future, a dream the parents find so important and so appealing that they are willing to make personal sacrifices and to work with others to achieve it. Such a point has arrived for my friends and me. Now it is our turn to forge a new American Dream.

I had been thinking about the creation of national dreams during a recent Esquire editorial luncheon when the guest of honor, an architect and museum curator, remarked almost out of the blue,

“One has to know what time it is if one is going to effectively make something happen.” I was intrigued, because he had provided me with an expression for what had been nagging at me: What time is it for America? This is the question facing today's parents.

A few weeks later I had a second conversation with this man. He is Arthur Drexler, director of the Architecture and Design Department of the Museum of Modern Art. His work for the last three decades has been to observe the modern world as it is being built and evaluate its aesthetic quality. I told him of my concerns for the future and my feeling that we were entering a time of passing the torch to the next generation. He said that for any human activity, whether art or government, the form has to be perceived by the people as being appropriate for the time. “Take the 1920s and the decade preceding World War I,” he said. “These were times of immense ferment and imagination and innovation and excitement. The people who lived in these times had a belief that something wonderful was happening. And there was a great explosion in the arts and in science, a period that produced Einstein and Cubism.” He went on to say that people living in that time, the birth of modernism, had believed that things would never be the same again. “Now, fifty years later,

modernism seems like nothing more than an episode in Western civilization, and we have returned to the grand ideas which go back to our Greco-Roman heritage. It is in this context that the historical revival and eclecticism of postmodern design seem suitable and appropriate.”

From the modern thinking of the 1920s evolved the intellectual forces that produced the New Deal. President Roosevelt's legislation redefined how our society allocated its resources; Keynesian economic theory suggested how to manage a society to make it prosperous. The end of World War II ushered in the age of material expectations and a world political view that has been essentially anticommunist, with cycles of interventionist and noninterventionist fervor. This was the America in which the latest generation of parents was raised. But it will not be the America the babies of today will inherit.

Little Alison and Brian will be growing up not in a world that invents the Pill, but in one that has to decide the rights of a fertilized egg in a test tube whose donor parents have died or lost interest. They will take for granted the rights of blacks and women but will have no choice but to face the issue of population relief. They will live in an era of active, health-conscious fifty-plus-year-olds and will debate proper care for the

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infirm aged. Their foreign political horizons will be neither as clear-cut as those of their grandparents, who experienced World War II and Korea, nor as myopic as those of their parents, who witnessed the Bay of Pigs invasion and Vietnam. They will grow up in an era that is focused on the biological sciences, computerized technology, and the possibilities of space warfare. They will be of less significance politically than their more numerous and prosperous parents.

In short, theirs will be another time, the seeds of which are being sown today.

As is true for every generation, its members cannot choose the nature of the world they will inherit—they can only determine the world they will leave their children. Alison and Brian will have to contend with the world that is now being created by this generation of parents.

I don't know why I've been worrying so much about all this. Maybe it's my own age, my own sense of responsibility. Or maybe it's because the upcoming presidential elections have elicited so much negative comment. I hear so many people decrying the lack of true alternatives in the candidates, and I understand. Both candidates are living in the past, speaking to the past, and very insensitive to the responsibilities that the parents

of Brian and Alison face. Arthur Drexler said to me that this is "a time of transition, of people hedging their bets for fear of being crushed by the glacial change of time when it comes." The parents of Brian and Alison seem to feel the need for a political leadership that will be able to speak to that transition, to lead the American people through the anxiety of change that will inevitably come.

There must be a rearticulation of the American Dream, a redefinition of the nation's priorities in the context of today's possibilities. We simply will not be able to raise our children on the old promises. There has to be, as it were, a postmodern set of promises, embracing our traditional values but adjusted to our new self-image—a view of tomorrow that reflects the lessons of the last fifty years.

It is incumbent on the parents of Alison and Brian and Cleveland and Lisa to help search for that new American Dream, to give it expression in their lives. It is out there, I can sense it moving into focus, although I cannot give it proper expression. It's on the faces of some of today's young leaders. It's reflected in the way people are finding out about health, debating the issues of education, rushing to embrace high-tech skills. It is occasionally whispered about in the movies, buried in one of the

new political biographies, fleetingly referred to in an occasional political forum or foreshadowed in a new play.

The United States is a pluralistic nation of strong individual freedoms and of eclectic beliefs. In such a society, a new dream, in the final analysis, can only grow in the hearts of the parents themselves, forged by the heat of the emotions of their lives, tempered by the rational maturity of experience, and empowered by the love they have for the children they have created.

The first step for the parents of Brian and Alison and Cleveland and Lisa is to accept the responsibility of knowing what time it is.