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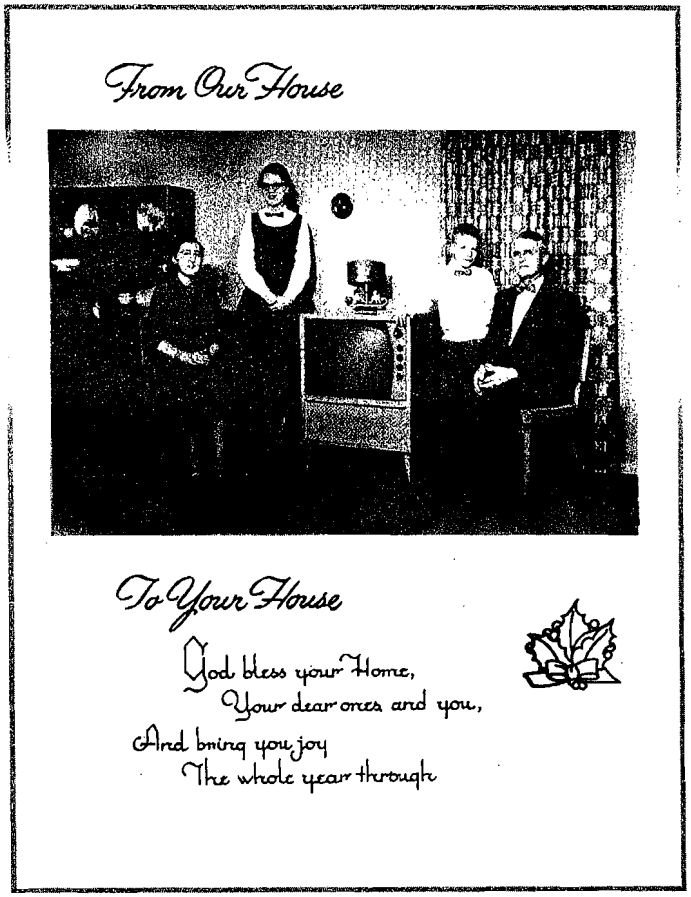
You Don't Need Their Approval: The Decline of Social Rules

Getting dressed in the morning is a fundamentally different experience today than it was forty years ago. For all of Generation Me's lifetime, clothes have been a medium of self-expression, an individual choice in a range of alternatives and comfort. Contrast this to past decades, when men wore ties most of the time and women did not leave the house without crisp white gloves and a tight girdle. Pictures of crowds in the early 1960s show quaint sights like men wearing three-piece suits at baseball games and ladies lined up in identical-length skirts. To GenMe, these images look like people on an alien planet—who wears a suit to a baseball game?

Even our shoes are different. Today's casual footwear is called tennis shoes because people once wore them only to play tennis or basketball. Not even kids wore these types of shoes on the street—their shoes were made of stiff leather, just like adults'.

Now that's all but forgotten. Except in the most formal of workplaces, few men wear suits to work anymore, and virtually no one wears them to baseball games. Women have (thankfully) abandoned wearing tight girdles and white gloves everywhere they go (and many young women don't even know what a girdle *is*). The trend toward more informal dress has accelerated in the past ten years, with many companies opting for "business casual" and others going for just plain casual. The trend reached all the way to the top in July 2006, when about half the members of the Nor[illegible]



Holiday card, Minnesota, 1955. Not only are the clothes formal, but so is the posing and demeanor. The perfect family was proper and composed.

lacrosse team wore flip-flops during their White House visit, resulting in a picture of the president of the United States standing next to several young women wearing shoes that were once reserved for walking on sand or showering in skuzzy gymnasiums. Although most people still want to look good, we are a much more informal and accepting society than we once were. This is a perfect illustration of generational trends in attitudes, as the entire point in dressing up is to make a good impression on others and elicit their approval. You don't dress

Holiday card, Massachusetts, 2004. Formal clothing is no longer necessary to make a good impression. It is now more important to be relaxed, natural, and happy.

formally for yourself or for your comfort; if you really wanted to do things "your way" and just for yourself, you'd wear jeans to work. And, of course, many of us already do.

The strict rules of previous decades went far beyond appearance. Beneath the wool suits and tailored hats, yesterday's men and women were bound by another type of conformity. Male or female, you were considered strange if you did not marry by age 25 and even stranger if you married outside your race or religion. It was expected that you would have children—it was not considered a choice. Your race and sex dictated your fate and behavior. When war came, you went to fight if you were male and able. Overall, duty and responsibility were held more important than individual needs and wants. There were certain things you did, certain things you said, and certain things you didn't talk about. End of story.

Today, few of these rules apply. We are driven instead by our individual needs and desires. We are told to follow our dreams, to pursue happiness above all else. It's OK to be different, and you should do what's right for you. Compared to Boomers in 1973, GenMe is twice as likely to agree with the statement "There is no single right way to live." Young people say that the most important quality a child can learn is "to think for himself or herself," and only half as many young people as old say that obedience is a good lesson for children.

The choices of the individual are now held so paramount that the most common advice given to teenagers is "Just be yourself." (Not that long ago, it was more likely to be "Be polite.") Filmmaker Kevin Smith (*Clerks*) says, "My generation believes we can do almost anything. My characters are free: no social mores keep them in check." Or take Melissa, 20, who says, "I couldn't care less how I am viewed by society. I live my life according to the morals, views, and standards that I create."

This is the social trend—so strong it's really a revolution—that ties all of the generational changes together in a neat, tight bundle: do what makes you happy, and don't worry about what other people think. It is enormously different from the cultural ethos of previous decades, and it is a philosophy that GenMe takes entirely for granted. "As long as I believe in myself, I really do not care what others think," says Rachel, 21.

GENERATIONS AT THE CINEMA

This ethos appears frequently in popular movies; my favorite examples involve what I call "the apparent time traveler." The main character in these films is supposed to be a real person in the 1950s, but he or she actually represents the enlightened voice of the twenty-first century, which makes him (or her) the hero of the film. In 2003's *Mona Lisa Smile*, Julia Roberts plays a professor at Wellesley College in 1953. Soon after arriving, she rallies her students against the restrictions of early marriage and training for motherhood. When she critiques sexist advertising during a class, we in the audience all know exactly what she is doing, but few people in the 1950s would have seen it before—or even thought to do it. Roberts's character has clearly taken the time traveler shuttle to the future and absconded with a copy of the 1987 feminist antiadvertising film *Still Killing Us Softly*.

The Majestic, released in 2001, is an even worse movie. Jim Carrey's character, a Hollywood screenwriter, gets blacklisted and takes refuge in a small town. After he is asked to testify, he manages to convince the entire town that McCarthyism is bad and that free speech is our most treasured right. When I watched this movie (I was on a plane; it was not a matter of free will), my mouth dropped almost to the floor as the whole town united behind the accused writer and the main female character said, "It doesn't really matter if you are a Communist or not—this is America and you can be one if you want to. It's nobody's business." Uh, not really. Had this actually been the 1950s, an accused Communist would have been everybody's business.

Movies that admit to time travel are somewhat more enjoyable. In *Pleasantville*, two teenagers from 1998 help a 1950s town find passion and the freedom of ideas. Every character who discovers an individualistic freedom like sex or intellectual questioning instantly turns from black and white into color. The film sinks into predictability once discrimination against the "colored" people begins. (Get it?) *Back to the Future*, probably the only good movie among these four, also promotes the individualistic ethos but has a better story. When Marty McFly travels from 1985 back to 1955, he finds that his father George lacks assertiveness and mumbles a lot. Marty teaches George to stand up for himself, and, in a fit of sudden self-confidence, George punches the local bully and gets the girl who will become Marty's mother. When Marty returns to 1985, his parents are now successful, rich, and still in love with each other. George has even become a published novelist. ("If you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything," he says, repeating Marty's radical-for-1955 advice.) Believing in yourself has clearly paid off.

Other movies travel across cultures rather than time, but they promote the same message. In 2002's *Bend It Like Beckham*, an Asian-Indian girl living in London wants to play soccer. Her parents, already taken aback that their older daughter did not have an arranged marriage, want the younger Jess to learn to cook and be a proper young lady. The plot comes to a head when Jess must shuttle back and forth between a game and her sister's wedding. By the end of the movie, Jess wants to join a professional women's soccer team and move to America. Her parents, finally convinced that it's right for Jess to follow her dreams, reluctantly agree. The overall message of all of these movies—whether they travel in time or cultures—is to rebel against restrictive social mores. Don't follow the rules; do whatever makes you happy.

And sometimes you don't even need to travel. The biggest box-office draw in late 2004 and early 2005 was *Meet the Fockers*, the sequel to the highly successful comedy *Meet the Parents*. The movie revolves around the culture clash between the conservative Byrnes family and the hippie Focker family. The Fockers provide most of the comedy in the film, with their sex therapy business, their leather sandals, and their display of their

son's ninth-place ribbons (because, they say, "It's not about winning—it's about what's in your heart"). But by the end of the movie, the Fockers are not the ones who have been convinced to change—it's the straight-laced Byrnes family who learns from *them*. Mr. Byrnes, played to crusty perfection by Robert De Niro, learns to loosen up and show emotion toward his daughter. He also decides that it might be good for him and his wife to enjoy more physical affection in their marriage, and puts some of Mrs. Focker's sex tips to good use. Hippies may be laughable, but they teach us how to live. No need to walk around all uptight like that—which, of course, you must be if you're not a hippie. I'm exaggerating a bit, but the movie does make it very clear which message is paramount, and it's definitely Let It All Hang Out.

These movies dramatize two interlocking changes: the fall of social rules and the rise of the individual. As the individualistic viewpoint became prominent, concern with the opinions of others plummeted. This chapter discusses the decline in the need for social approval, and the following two chapters document the ascendance of the individual self. Over the last few decades, the entire nation has experienced the transformation parodied in an episode of *The Simpsons*, when Springfield's usual "Do What We Say Festival" (started, they say, in 1946 by German settlers) is replaced with the new "Do What You Feel Festival."

DANCE PARTY REVOLUTION (AGAINST CONFORMITY)

In a famous piece of art, Andy Warhol copied the instruction cards from the 1950s Arthur Murray dance school. Each black and white card showed shoe prints where the student was to stand on each step. Warhol meant the piece to capture the conformity of the times, when learning to dance involved precise rules designed to present a graceful picture to those watching.

For all of GenMe's lifetime, however, dancing has been an individual, free-form event. For the 90% of songs that are fast dances, you don't even need a partner, and you move to the music any way you want. The few slow dances involve a little more closeness but no real skill: the girl's arms go around the guy's neck, his arms go around her waist, and you both shuffle around in an endless circle until the song is over. (I can hear the strains of Chicago's "You're the Inspiration" and feel the sweaty pain of a junior high school dance even now.)

Even in this modern slow dance, it's not necessary to learn any rules or to move harmoniously with a partner. I've seen this generational divide play out at wedding receptions over and over, including at my own. For the father-of-the-bride dance, my dad automatically assumed the dance position of his generation, with one hand up to hold mine and the other at my waist. He then began to move in some kind of cadenced waltz step. I'd never danced this way before. It was all I could do not to fall down.

I'm not sure what wedding receptions will look like in the future; I can't imagine a father of the bride doing the junior-high-slow-dance circle shuffle with his daughter. But the GenMe father of the bride of the future might not know how to couple-dance any other way.

DO YOUR OWN THING

Consider this scenario: You are seated at a table with six other people. Four lines are drawn on a chalkboard at the front of the room: a medium-length target line, along with line A, medium, line B, short, and line C, long. You're to say which of the lines is the same length as the target. You're all ready with the obvious answer of A, but the six others go first and say line C. What do you do?

When Solomon Asch first performed this experiment in 1951, 74% of people gave the group's incorrect answer on at least one trial, and 28% did on the majority of trials. People felt the need to conform to the group and not to stand out. The study became one of the most famous in social psychology, taught in every class as an example of the social nature of human beings. Yet some have pointed out that this was the essence of getting along in 1950s society, when no one wanted to be thought of as different. But when researchers tried to replicate the study in 1980, they got completely different results: few people conformed to the group anymore. Apparently, it was no longer fashionable to go along with the group even when they were wrong. The authors of the study concluded that the Asch study was "a child of its time."

Throughout the 1970s, self-help books and therapists actively encouraged people to flout social rules, telling readers they should stop

caring about what others think. A central chapter in the 1976 megabestseller *Your Erroneous Zones* by Wayne Dyer is called "You Don't Need Their Approval." The author argues that people can do anything they put their minds to, and that others' opinions only get in the way. (It's probably no coincidence that both the cover and back of the book feature oversize pictures of the author, complete with a 1970s powder blue V-neck shirt and the resulting display of male chest hair.) Dyer rants on and on about how courteous acts like giving a wedding gift or attending a funeral are "musterbation," his double-entendre term for unnecessary social rules. Dyer argues that seeking approval from parents, teachers, and bosses undermines self-reliance and truth. "Needing approval is tantamount to saying 'Your view of me is more important than my own opinion of myself,'" he writes. Another self-help book carries on the tradition with the title *What You Think of Me Is None of My Business*. Unlike the Baby Boomers who learned these new standards as adults, GenMe takes these attitudes for granted and always has.

"Do your own thing" is the central ethos of modern parenting. In 1924, a group of sociologists did an extensive study of the citizens of a place they called Middletown (later revealed as Muncie, Indiana). When mothers were asked which traits they wanted their children to have, they named strict obedience, loyalty to church, and good manners. In 1988, few mothers named these traits; instead, they chose independence and tolerance. Modern mothers might be gratified to learn that these values now appear frequently. In *Growing Up Digital*, an 11-year-old girl says, "I think the individual determines what is cool, and it is his or her opinion. What is cool to one person might not be to another. The days of conformity are over." Danielle, 29, agrees. "I refuse to do something because it's what everyone else is doing, or because it's the socially acceptable thing to do at the time," she says. When I asked my undergraduate students to name the characteristics that best described their generation, the two most popular answers were "independent" and "open-minded."

GenMe has been taught these values almost since birth. *Free to Be You and Me*, one of the most popular children's films during the 1970s and 1980s, trumpets individuality in forty-five minutes of catchy songs and stories. Many people I know have it practically memorized; my third-grade class in Irving, Texas, watched it almost every Friday in the early 1980s. One song says, "When I grow up I'm going to be happy and do what I like to do." Another skit gives examples of animals dressed by their owners ("Don't dress your horse in a nightgown just cuz he can't stay awake") and concludes, "A person should wear what he wants to, and not just what other folks say."

A 1977 manual for teachers stated as its central philosophy, "I am a self and you are a self and I don't want to be made to feel guilty if I am not like you nor should you be made to feel guilty if you are unlike me." Amanda, 22, says that one of the main lessons in her Girl Scout troop was "being different is good." It's a mantra GenMe has heard over and over. We absorbed the lesson of tolerance with our baby food—not just for race and religion, but for sexual orientation, beliefs, feelings, and all kinds of other intangibles. Just about the only difference that wasn't good? Someone who was prejudiced.

"For my grandparents, questioning their religion, their country's system of government, or what they ate was not acceptable. The fear of standing out or being judged by others for their beliefs was strong," says John, 25. "My generation is much more independent. I pride myself on being a free and independent thinker. My wish is to break down the walls that humans have socially constructed." A book on generations in the workplace notes that today's young people were instructed to "Never just do what an adult asks. Always ask, 'Why?'"

This means that GenMe often takes for granted the nullity of others' opinions. Cynthia, 26, wrote about the breakup of her marriage: "When I decided to get divorced, at no moment did I ever care about what others would say about my decision." In an earlier time, of course, the social ramifications of a divorce would have been a major concern. Now little social stigma is attached to divorce, and most people consider it completely acceptable to divorce if you are unhappy—or to leave the mother of your children. A prime example from the lower end of popular culture is Britney Spears's husband Kevin Federline, who left girlfriend Shar Jackson when she was seven months pregnant with their second child. Some people saw this behavior as not just acceptable but laudatory. "I was excited to see Britney, her fiancé, and future stepdaughter, on the cover," Kristy Nichols of Cleveland wrote to *People* magazine. "It's refreshing to see that her fiancé chooses to be with her because of love and not with Shar Jackson just because they have children together." *Just* because.

WHO CARES WHAT YOU THINK?

Not caring what others think may also explain the decline in manners and politeness. Because we no longer believe that there is one right way of doing things, most of us were never taught the rules of etiquette. Although it's fine to wear white shoes after Labor Day and use whatever fork you want, most etiquette was developed to provide something often lacking in modern life: respect for other people's comfort. "Society has gotten increasingly callous and me-centered, and we're fed up with [the results]," says Corinne Gregory, founder of a class called the PoliteChild. Diane Diehl, who runs a similar class, agrees. "Kids are being encouraged by pop culture to be disrespectful and self-destructive, and their parents are frightened and looking for help." A high school teacher told me that she noticed her students don't "clean up nice"—they find it difficult to not swear and to speak more formally when necessary. They talk to older people and authority figures the same way they talk to their friends. A business book relates the story of a company founder who visited one of his shops and asked a young employee how she was doing. "Well, a little hungover this morning, but okay," she replied.

Basic consideration for others seems to be on the wane as well. I am continually amazed at how many people drive down the street blasting music from their car stereos, often with their windows rolled all the way down. Some drivers soup up their car engines so they will make even more noise. Others will carry on loud conversations in hotel hallways at all hours of the day and night, or will allow the room door to swing open and then slam shut so loudly that the walls shake. In both of these situations, the perpetrators seem not to realize—or care—that their actions are disturbing dozens—and sometimes hundreds—of other people.

It goes beyond manners—people today are less likely to follow all kinds of social rules. Business professor John Trinkaus finds that fewer people now slow down in a school zone, and fewer observe the item limit in a supermarket express lane. More people cut across parking lots to bypass stoplights. In 1979, 29% of people failed to stop at a particular stop sign in a New York suburb, but by 1996 a stunning 97% of drivers did not stop at all. In Trinkaus's most ironic finding, the number of people who paid the suggested fee for lighting a candle at a Catholic church decreased from 92% to 28% between the late 1990s and the early 2000s.

In other words, 72% of people cheated the church out of money in the most recent observation.

Cheating in school has also increased. In 2002, 74% of high school students admitted to cheating, up from 61% in 1992. In 1969, only 34% of high school students admitted to cheating, less than half of the 2002 number. This continues into college; a 2002 survey found that 80% of students at Texas A&M University admitted to cheating. Technology has facilitated this dishonesty, with students passing answers through camera cell phones and downloading papers on the Internet. Other times all it takes is good old-fashioned money: one of the heirs to the Wal-Mart fortune allegedly paid her college roommate more than $20,000 to write papers for her.

Not only are teens more likely to cheat, but they are resigned to cheating among their peers. In a 1997 survey, 88% of high school students said that cheating was common at their school. Three times as many high school students in 1969 compared to 1989 said they would report someone they saw cheating. Also in 1989, an incredible 97% of high school students said they had let someone else copy their work. The disregard for rules continues outside the classroom: in 2000, 26% of high school boys admitted they had shoplifted from a store at least once.

This breakdown in consideration and loyalty, and the increase in cheating, reaches all the way to the top. Business scandals like those at WorldCom and Enron demonstrate that many people have little problem with breaking rules and telling lies in an attempt to make more money. Even honest businesses disregard other time-tested social rules, such as loyalty to employees. Companies are now more likely to raid pension funds and engage in mass layoffs to prop up a sinking stock price. Others ship jobs overseas if it will save money. "Downsizing" and "outsourcing" are the modern corporate equivalents of rudeness—and a lot more devastating. Because GenMe grew up with this kind of ruthlessness, it should not surprise us that they think little of some occasional homework-copying. It also suggests that the corporations of the future are going to need much stricter oversight to make sure that cheating and scams are kept to a minimum. Cheating on tests easily translates to cheating on the balance sheet. Expect to see more laws, like Sarbanes-Oxley, that ask corporations to prove that they are not cheating their stockholders. Even with these laws, more stock reports, research, and articles will have to be

taken with a grain of salt—in an increasingly competitive world, the temptation to cheat will be ever stronger for GenMe.

CALL ME BETH

Boomers laid claim to the phrase "question authority" during the 1960s. But GenMe doesn't just question authority—we disrespect it entirely. "Older generations trusted God, the church, government, and elders," says Kevin, 22. "I have questioned things and people that earlier generations never would have thought to." This is the eventual outcome of increased informality and the loosening of social rules, and many people would rightly argue that questioning things is good. Sometimes "traditions" are outmoded and need challenging.

But sometimes GenMe takes the questioning of authority a little too far. Education professor Maureen Stout tells the story of a young man in her class who did not turn in his research paper. "After a lot of excuses and arguments he finally came out with it," Stout writes. "He believed he was entitled to do just as he pleased and refused to recognize my authority, as the instructor, to determine what the assignments in the class should be. It was as simple as that." In *Generation X Goes to College*, Peter Sacks relates his frustration with the community college students he taught after spending ten years as a journalist. Students seemed uncomfortable with the idea that he knew more than they did, and even with "the idea that my knowledge and skills were important or even relevant." Student after student balked when he corrected their essays, several complaining that his comments were "just your opinion."

I recognized this phrase immediately, as I'd heard it over and over from my own students. I heard this complaint even when I corrected obvious errors like run-on sentences and incorrect punctuation, things that were clearly not a matter of opinion. Even multiple-choice tests weren't free from this kind of challenge. In one class, I decided it might be a good idea to review the correct answers to exam questions—it would be a way to correct misconceptions and help the students learn, I thought. Almost immediately, several students began to argue with me about the questions, claiming that the answer they had chosen was right. Since there wasn't a grading mistake, I was forced to explain again why the answers were correct, but they continued to argue. It was the worst

class I'd ever had. After it was over, an older student—who had not been one of the arguers—came up to me and said with disbelief, "Twenty years ago when I got my first degree, we never questioned teachers like that."

Sacks interviewed a veteran teacher who described a "real qualitative shift" in college students during the late 1980s (not coincidentally, exactly when the first GenMe'ers arrived). He said they had "a sense of entitlement" and were "not very deferential. Some are outright hustlers and try to browbeat professors into giving good grades." Another fellow professor advised Sacks to adopt the more informal approach that she used. In her first class, she always announced: "I have some expertise and you have some expertise. My job is to facilitate this process. And please call me Beth."

The message: We are all equals here. I might have a Ph.D. and years of experience, but that doesn't mean I know any more than you. This is, of course, a lot of the reason for the crumbling of authority and the new acceptance of questioning those in charge. This new democracy in education and the workplace has been energized by the new informality in dress and names. While the boss was once "Mr. Smith" or "Mrs. Jones," now bosses are instead "Mike" or "Linda." "Mr." and "Mrs." sound too stiff and formal—and old-fashioned. When we're all on a first-name basis, the specter of authority takes yet another step back into the shadows of a previous era.

Classrooms are increasingly structured for teachers to be "facilitators" rather than authority figures. Lecturing is frowned upon; "collaborative learning" is in. Class presentations and group projects are common. Sometimes the teacher hardly says anything. In *Growing Up Digital*, Don Tapscott describes a Web-page class where "students learn to cooperate, work in teams, solve problems, and take responsibility for their own learning—by doing." If they don't understand something, they are supposed to ask each other, not the teacher. "And who's the last person you ask for help?" says the teacher. "You are," the students reply. The teacher goes on to say: "I don't teach. If I teach, who knows what they will learn. Teaching's out. . . . If they stop and think about it, they are the authority! They are in charge of their own learning."

The curriculum reflects this lack of a central authority as well. It is no longer enough to teach only the "classics"; these are now known as DWMs (Dead White Males). Few academics still agree that there is a

"canon" of Western literature that all students should learn. Instead, students must take classes teaching a variety of perspectives, in which the works of women and minorities are also covered. Whether you agree or disagree with this "multicultural" approach to education, it's clear that we no longer answer to one definite authority. There are many opinions, and each is considered valuable. Though this has many advantages, it does mean that people will be much less likely to conform to societal rules—after all, which rules would they follow? Which culture or society is "right"? We are taught that none of them is, or all of them are.

Unless it's the Internet. Like most people old enough to remember a pre-Internet world, I marvel that we ever got along without it. (How *did* we find movie showtimes in the early 1990s? Oh, yeah, that weird recording where a teenager with acting aspirations would read off the movies and times.) As fantastic as the Internet is for doing research, it also democratizes the source of information. Suddenly, you don't have to write a textbook or have a column in a major newspaper for thousands of people to read your words—just put up a Web page or a blog, and eventually someone, and maybe even lots of people, will stumble across it. In this environment, there is no authority: information is free, diffuse, and comes from everyone. (Whether it is correct is another matter.) Tapscott argues that the current generation of young people is very contrarian. Unlike the passivity of TV, the Web is often interactive. Message boards and chat rooms promote two-way dialogue—of information, opinion, and sometimes insult (called "flaming"). "Because they have the tools to question, challenge, and disagree, these kids are becoming a generation of critical thinkers," writes Tapscott. It's yet another force toward chucking those pesky rules. And in many Internet situations, you can abandon social roles entirely. Want to be a different age or sex? Go ahead. As a famous *New Yorker* cartoon showing two dogs in conversation puts it, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

Parental authority also isn't what it used to be. "Parents are no longer eager to be 'parents.' They want to love and guide their children as a trusted friend," says family studies professor Robert Billingham in a recent *Chicago Sun-Times* article. Chicago-area parent Richard Shields says that his 17-year-old son is his best friend. He prefers them to have fun together rather than impose strict rules or discipline. "It's better for them to see our values and decide to gain them for themselves," he says.

This also means that children play a much larger role in family decisions. The kids who chose their own outfits as preschoolers have grown into teenagers who help their parents choose which car to buy or even where to live. The *Sun-Times* article interviewed a large group of teens and their families, finding one where a teenage daughter helped her father decide on a new job, and another where the two teenage kids make all of the home-decorating and electronics-purchasing decisions. Forty percent of teens see their opinions as "very important" in making family decisions. In an earlier era of greater parental authority, that percentage would have been close to zero. One family's two daughters convinced their parents to buy a second car. "I always stress to my girls to be opinionated," said Christine Zapata, the girls' mother. "I guess that sort of backfires on me sometimes."

I wonder what will happen when this generation has their own children. Will they continue the move toward lesser parental authority, or insist that they retain the authority they have grown accustomed to? If GenMe teaches our own children to be individualistic as well, we may have a full-scale battle of the wills once our kids become teenagers themselves.

BEING DIFFERENT IS GOOD, EVEN WHEN YOU'RE GETTING MARRIED

As one of society's most long-lived traditions, marriage and weddings illustrate the move away from social rules better than anything. In 1957, 80% of people said that those who didn't marry were "sick, neurotic, or immoral." Now, of course, when and whether you marry is considered a personal choice. Whom you marry is also fast falling into that category. My parents, a Catholic and a Lutheran (though both white and alike in every other way), were considered a "mixed marriage" at their wedding in 1967. People in my mother's Minnesota hometown whispered about it behind cupped hands for weeks. In contrast, no one blinked an eye when my brother married my sister-in-law in 2003, even though she is Jewish and this is a much larger religious difference. My Catholic relatives danced the hora at their wedding and had a great time, and my parents and I attended my niece's naming ceremony with tremendous pride.

Interracial marriage has also become much more common, doubling since 1980 and now accounting for 1 in 17 marriages. Yet until the Supreme Court struck down miscegenation laws in 1967, whites and blacks could not legally marry each other in sixteen states. In fact, the last antimiscegenation law was not officially repealed until November 2000, in Alabama. Now these unions are everywhere, and between almost all ethnicities and races. My next-door neighbors for three years were a Mexican-American man and his half-Jewish, half-Italian wife, and I've lost count of the number of Asian-white marriages among people I know. Almost half of Asian women will marry a white man. In a 1997 survey of college freshmen, a whopping 95% agreed that "in dating, the important thing is how two people get along, not what race or religion they may be." In 2000, 41% of high school seniors said they had dated someone of another race.

Many young people I've talked to mention interracial dating as the biggest difference between them and their parents: many of their peers date across racial lines, but their parents don't agree with this. Several young women from Texas and North Carolina told me that if they dated a black man their fathers would meet the poor guy at the door with a shotgun. Yet most of GenMe finds this perplexing: who cares what race someone is? In one survey, only 10% of white young people said that marrying someone from their own ethnic group was important; however, 45% said it was important to their parents. Of young Asian-Americans, 32% said same-ethnic-group marriage was important to them, but 68% said it was important to their parents. Interracial marriage is likely to become even more common in the future as more and more young people meet and date people from different backgrounds.

When we marry to our other-race, other-religion, and possibly same-sex partners, we don't follow all of the wedding rules of previous generations. In the mid-1960s, *Brides* magazine insisted that "the only correct colors" for wedding invitations "are white, ivory, or cream, with absolutely no decorations such as borders, flower sprays, and so on." In other words, your invitation had to look just like everyone else's. Now, of course, people use wedding invitations in every possible theme and color—and wording. My parents, who live near Dallas, received a wedding invitation a few years ago with a picture of a cowboy and cowgirl inviting guests to "c'mon over for a big weddin' to-do." The reply card

Weddings, once governed by strict conventions for dress and behavior, now have few rules. It's your wedding, so you can wear shorts or a bikini if you want to.

choices were "Yes, we'll be there with our boots on" and "Shucks, we can't make it."

People are bending tradition in other ways. Some brides with male friends have a man of honor, and some grooms have best women. When former *Beverly Hills, 90210* star Tori Spelling married Charlie Shanian in 2004, she had five bridesmaids and two bridesmen, and he had five groomsmen and three groomswomen. Another trend encourages brides to let each bridesmaid choose the style of her gown—it's no longer required that they all wear the same dress, a rule now seen as overly conformist. Many couples write their own vows, wanting a ceremony personalized to speak for their own individual love. I once saw a ceremony that was written specifically for recovering addicts—not exactly the Book of Common Prayer. And the new trend in wedding photography is toward "journalistic" style; the photographers capture moments as they happen,

putting less emphasis on formal posing. Wedding aren't about rules anymore, but about individual expression. Wedding gown designer Reem Acra says a bride should choose the look that encapsulates her personality. She says, "I always ask my brides, 'Who are you and what do you want to tell everybody?'"

THE CHURCH AND COMMUNITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL

GenMe is also less willing to follow the rules of organized religion. Church attendance across all faiths has declined 30% since the 1950s, and about half of that decline occurred since the 1980s. Unlike the Boomers, who seek spirituality as a chosen quest, GenMe is not very religious. Only 18% of 18-to-29-year-olds attend religious services every week. Among high school seniors, most of whom still live with their parents, the figure is still only 26%. Even in the South, fewer than 1 out of 3 high school seniors attends religious services weekly. The number of college freshmen who named no religious preference doubled between 1985 and 2003, and the number of students who said they prayed weekly decreased from 1996 to 2003. It will be interesting to see if this generation returns to churchgoing and religion once more have children themselves.

In *Emerging Adulthood*, Jeffrey Arnett describes the belief systems of young people as "highly individualized," which he calls "make-your-own-religions." He found that only 23% of young people are "conservative believers"; the remaining 77% were agnostic/atheist, deist, or liberal believers (who believe in a religion but question some aspects of it). Many don't adhere to a specific belief system because, as Melissa says, "I believe that whatever you feel, it's personal. . . . Everybody has their own idea of God and what God is. . . . You have your own personal beliefs of how you feel about it and what's acceptable for you and what's right for you personally." In an April 2005 poll, 3 out of 4 American Catholics said they were more likely to "follow my own conscience" on difficult moral questions rather than follow "the teachings of Pope Benedict."

Many young people abandon organized religion because of, you guessed it, the restrictive rules it often imposes. Interviewed in *Emerging Adulthood*, Dana said she attended Jewish services growing up, but

stopped going when she got older because "there was this pressure from the people at the synagogue to be, like, kosher, and I just didn't like having anyone telling me what my lifestyle should be." Beth was raised Catholic but by adulthood came to believe that humans all have natural, animalistic urges; she stopped believing because feeling guilty "made me unhappy." Charles grew up Episcopalian but stopped attending because "I realized I was not being encouraged to think for myself. . . . It is, literally, 'This is black. This is white. Do this. Don't do that.' And I can't hang with that."

Many of the churches that have grown in membership in the past few decades are the fundamentalist Christian denominations that do require more strict adherence. However, these churches promote a very personalized form of religion. Many fundamentalist Christian faiths ask one to believe that "Jesus Christ is your personal savior" and that "He has a plan for your life." I heard these phrases from my high school classmates in suburban Dallas very often; many spoke with pride about having "a personal relationship with God." Rick Warren, author of the popular Christian book *The Purpose-Driven Life*, writes, "Accept yourself. Don't chase after other people's approval. . . . God accepts us unconditionally, and in His view we are all precious and priceless." These denominations teach that one's personal faith guarantees acceptance into heaven, not the good works you perform and the way you treat others (which traditionally defined a proper spiritual outlook and its rewards). Even if you are a murderer, you will be saved if you accept Jesus as your personal savior. Of course, most adherents strive to live good lives, but personal beliefs are considered more important.

Churches are not the only group hurting for members. As Robert Putnam documents in *Bowling Alone*, memberships in community groups have declined by more than one-fourth since the 1970s. Groups like the Elks, the Jaycees, and PTA groups have all seen memberships fall. Putnam labels the trend "civic disengagement" and concludes that it is linked to generational shifts. The title of his book comes from the observation that people used to bowl in organized leagues but now bowl alone or in informal groups. Young people would rather do their own thing than join a group.

We're also less likely to trust our neighbors, and less likely to believe that the world is a welcoming place. In 1976, 46% of high school stu-

dents said that "most people can be trusted" (versus "you can't be too careful in dealing with people"). By 1997, teens' trust in others had slid to 26%. In 2000, 64% of 18-to-24-year-olds said that most people are "just looking out for themselves" rather than "try[ing] to be helpful," and 53% said that most people "would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance." Among 45-to-54-year-olds, however, the majority said that most people would be helpful and fair. GenMe trusts no one, suggesting a culture growing ever more toward disconnection and away from close communities. Trusting no one and relying on yourself is a self-fulfilling prophecy in an individualistic world where the prevailing sentiment is "Do unto others before they do it to you."

THE WORLDWIDE CONFESSIONAL

Maria, 20, says her mother's motto is "Other people don't have to know about the bad things that happen in the family." It's a belief that few in GenMe share. We think that confession is good for the soul, and this no longer means whispering to a priest in a dark booth. It means telling everyone about your experiences and feelings, no matter how distasteful. Shannon, 25, grew up in an abusive household and overdosed on crystal meth when she was 18. In therapy, she learned not to be ashamed of what happened. "You can't build a wall around it—it is better to talk about it and get it out in the open," she says. "I go around to people I just met and tell them my story, hoping they will learn something from my experience."

When I recently asked my students to relate true stories for an extra-credit assignment, I assured them they could tell their own story in the third person if they didn't want me to know it was actually about them. Not one took me up on the offer; instead, I got myriad first-person stories, with names attached, about teenage sex, drug abuse, psychological disorders, ugly divorces, and family disagreements. One student wrote about losing her virginity at age 14 to a man who had only eight toes. So many students wrote candid essays about sex that I finally took it off the list of topics because I had more than enough stories. None of the students cared if I knew details of their personal lives that other generations would have kept as carefully guarded secrets.

This applies in spoken conversation as well. Jenny, 22, is an undergraduate at a small college in the South. When we met at a psychology

conference, I asked her about her career plans. Within two minutes, she was telling me about her broken engagement and how her former fiancé had been depressed. This was all done without pretense or embarrassment. In a recent survey of men, 62% of those 18 to 24 said they are comfortable discussing their personal problems with others, compared to only 37% of those age 65 and older. Many older people are amazed that young people will readily share their salary numbers with others, the disclosure of which once carried a strong taboo.

GenMe is also much more open about emotions. "In my generation, as opposed to my parents' or my grandparents', we are told to express our feelings and anger and sadness about our surroundings and not to hold them in," says Ashley, 24. She's not sure this is a good thing, however. "We are an emotionally spoiled generation," she says. "It can lead to more dramatic emotions when you are always discussing, sharing, analyzing them as our generation is led to feel they should do."

But that's not the message young people receive from most of the culture. Even sharing feelings that might muddle a situation is encouraged. In a 2001 episode of the teen show *Dawson's Creek*, one character does not want to confess her romantic feelings to her former boyfriend, who is now dating someone else. "If it broke my heart, I have no right to say so," she says. Her roommate can't believe what she's hearing. Clearly meant to be the show's Voice of Reason, she announces, "You have the right to say anything you want when it comes to how you feel."

TMI COMING UP!

Health issues are also the subject of much more honest and open discussion. Not that long ago, it was not acceptable to talk about health problems, particularly women's health problems. I once asked my grandfather why they had only one child. "Too expensive," he said, though I knew he had made a good living. When I told my mother about this, she said my grandmother hadn't been able to have any more children. I asked why. "All he ever said was that she had 'female problems,'" my mother said. It was a term I'd heard before—for a certain generation, "female problems" was the closest anyone would ever come to uttering words like breast cancer, hysterectomy, endometriosis, uterus, infertility, or even menstrual period.

These days, of course, few people have qualms about using any of these terms, especially when talking with family or close friends—or, as it turns out, even with total strangers. I often read the message boards on ConstantChatter.com. In the "All Things Family" section, there are boards dedicated to pregnancy, childbirth, and trying to conceive. Women on these boards discuss everything, and I mean everything: not just morning sickness, but miscarriages, PMS, the precise appearance of cervical fluid, and the color of menstrual blood (brown or red today?), DTD (doing the deed), and BD (baby dancing) with their husbands. How often, and in what position, is also openly discussed, including any problems that might have arisen—or, sometimes, have not arisen (wink). Common phrases on these boards include "TMI coming up!" or "Sorry if TMI!" TMI, for those of you who are not GenMe, means "Too Much Information" (also called an "overshare"). I'm convinced the phrase was coined because there is so little that is now TMI, but we need a way to warn people before things become really gross. Of course, after warning about the TMI, everyone goes ahead and posts the details anyway.

There are also several support boards for women who have miscarried or lost a baby. Many tell their stories online. In one post, I read a woman's heartbreaking story of giving birth to a deformed child who died just a few hours after delivery. Her signature, which appears under every post she makes even to an open message board, includes the burial picture of her dead son.

These boards are extremely helpful, as they provide an enormous amount of information and support to women going through difficult life experiences. They're wonderful things—but an earlier generation of women would never have dreamed of discussing these topics in a public forum, and maybe not even with their closest friends. We live in a much more open age. In a 1990s study, 33% of women in their forties said that tampon commercials should not be aired on TV, whereas only 5% of women under 30 felt this way. Younger women said their main problem with feminine hygiene ads was that they insulted their intelligence with "outdated notions of modesty." Maybe it all started when we read those Judy Blume books that talked about Margaret getting her period and Tony having wet dreams. We've been able to talk about periods and wet dreams even before we had them, so it's no wonder we're so frank about

everything. Now there are not only tampon commercials, but ads for condoms, "personal lubricants" like K-Y jelly, and erection drugs (my favorite: the one where the guy throws the football through the hole in the tire swing. So subtle).

GENERATION DIRECT

This openness extends to all kinds of communications at work and at home. Some older business managers complain that young people today are too blunt. These managers say that young employees ask for instant feedback that's straightforward and uncomplicated, and give it in return. Some managers are surprised at young people's willingness to critique the performance of older people—it's a combination of the eroding respect for authority and the compulsive honesty of the younger generation. "I feel like the X'ers are so 'in your face,'" said one manager.

Young people see their directness as an asset. In one episode of the teen soap *The O.C.*, 16-year-old Seth makes a sarcastic comment, after which his father tells him, "Watch your mouth—I was trying to be polite. You might want to give it a try." Seth replies, "No, thanks, I'd rather be honest." So, to some GenMe'ers, if you're not true to yourself, and you conform to someone else's rules, you might be seen as dishonest or a victim of peer pressure—and avoiding that is more important than being polite. In his book *What Really Happened to the Class of '93*, Chris Colin describes Becky, a classmate who is unfailingly proper and polite; as a result, he complains that he can't "catch an unfettered glimpse of Becky's *core self*." Previous generations were unconcerned about seeing someone else's "core self," but for GenMe "not being yourself" equates to being somehow unwhole and false. Kim, 21, says her mother worries too much about other people's opinions; her mother says Kim should be ashamed when she doesn't take care with her appearance. Kim disagrees. "She should be ashamed of herself for being fake," she declares.

One student of mine took this principle a little too far. Aaron, 22, was the kind of student a teacher dreads—well intentioned and even sweet, but unable to keep his unorthodox opinions to himself. By the end of the term, the other students were openly hostile toward him because he interrupted the class so many times. He didn't see things this way, however. "You might view me as a 'rebel without a cause,'" he wrote. "But I

do have a cause. It is being true to me. When I am true to myself I feel confident and content. When I am untrue to myself I feel uneasy and fake. I have to be honest with myself as well as others." In other words, it's more important to be true to yourself than to be liked.

Overall, GenMe appreciates directness. "The older generations are so cautious and political in the way they phrase everything that half the time I don't know what they mean," said one young employee. Lynne Lancaster, one of the authors of the business book *When Generations Collide*, gives a nonbusiness example that perfectly captures this trend. Trying to teach her young stepsons better table manners, she said, "You see, when you're part of a family system, in which all of the parties have mutual respect and caring, it's important to recognize the cultural norms and behave appropriately." When the kids stared back with blank looks, their father—who knew how to relate to this generation—barked out, "Dammit! You both need to use a fork!" It worked.

#$@%&*%$!

These days, saying anything you want often includes words you might not want to say in front of your grandmother. Whether you're for or against this trend, it's clear that swearing is just not the shocker it used to be. The relaxation of the rules against swearing mirrors the same social trend as all of the others here—we swear because we don't care as much about what other people think.

Sixties radicals threw around words like "motherfucker" because they knew it would shock the older generation. It was their way of declaring their independence and showing that they didn't care if people disapproved of them. The shock value still exists to an extent, but many young people swear now just because that's the way they talk. The 1994 movie *Clerks* is a pretty accurate illustration of how young people talk, with about two swear words in every line. It proves the adage that "fuck" is the most versatile word in the English language, since it can be a noun, a verb, or an adjective. (Or even an adverb, as in Mr. Big's famous line in *Sex in the City*: "Absofuckinglutely.")

This comfort with profanity is especially common in college—even, as I found out, in official contexts. My first day of undergraduate orientation at the University of Chicago began with a meeting in a large Gothic

hall. After being welcomed by two administrators, a third came to the podium and asked us to note a change in the test schedule: the swimming test would be held tomorrow instead of today. A guy wearing swim trunks and a Big Bird intertube then walked down the center aisle, threw his hands up in frustration, and said, "Aw, fuck!"

As it turns out, the whole thing was staged—with administrative approval—by the campus comedy troupe, Off-Off-Campus. I remember being both stunned and pleased—people can swear in official meetings in college! This was not high school anymore! This was like summer camp with fewer rules! Sure enough, we had a discussion about "shitwork" in one of my sociology classes, and nobody even blinked. Everybody in my dorm swore like sailors. It was a huge adjustment to go home for Thanksgiving break and not tell my mother that the turkey was "really fuckin' good." (My advice to college students everywhere: *Don't* do this.) When I did let such words slip out, my mom's eyes would widen and she would put her hand over her mouth. Few of us in GenMe, of course, cover our mouths after someone swears. We may have when we were about 10 . . . but not if we got HBO.

There has been much public hand-wringing over the number of four-letter words now heard regularly in movies and on television—or, actually, five- and three-letter words. Network TV began allowing "bitch" in the 1980s, and the 1990s brought the best gift late-night comedians ever got: the ability to say "ass" on TV. David Letterman liked this so much he started a segment called "big-ass ham" just so he could say it over and over. And of course, characters on HBO and in R-rated movies utter four-letter words as if they were being paid for each usage. People against this trend often use an argument that should now sound familiar. American culture has become crude, rude, and socially unacceptable. Whatever happened to politeness and manners? Nobody cares what anyone thinks anymore. (I say @$#% them. Just kidding.)

WHAT THE DATA SAY ABOUT CONFORMITY AND THE NEED FOR SOCIAL APPROVAL

Do you like to gossip sometimes? Have you ever pretended to be sick to get out of doing something? Have you ever insisted on having your own way? Before you vote, do you carefully check the qualification of each

candidate? Are you always polite? Are you always willing to admit it when you've made a mistake?

If you answered no to the first three questions and yes to the next three, you have a high need for social approval. You want other people to see you as a good person, and you place high value on conventional behavior. What other people think matters a lot to you.

You are also probably not a member of Generation Me. These questions are from a measure called the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale. The scale measures a person's "need for social approval," and people who score high on it, according to the scale authors, display "polite, acceptable behavior" and follow "conventional, even stereotyped, cultural norms." My student Charles Im and I analyzed 241 studies that gave this questionnaire to college students and children, 40,745 individuals in all.

Not surprisingly, scores on the need for social approval have slid downward since the 1950s. The average college student in 2001 scored lower than 62% of college students in 1958. Put another way, the 2001 student scored at the 38th percentile compared to his or her 1958 peers. These percentiles work just like those on standardized tests—imagine your child taking a test and scoring at the 50th percentile one time and the 38th percentile another time. You would consider her average the first time, but be fairly concerned about her slipping performance the next.

I also wondered if children would show the same results—was it only college students who changed, or were kids also seeking social approval less? Sure enough, the results were similar. Children ages 9 to 12 showed rapidly decreasing needs for social approval. For example, the average 1999 GenMe fifth- or sixth-grader scored at the 24th percentile, or lower than 72% of kids in the 1960s. This is an even larger change than for the college students—you would be pretty upset if your child came home with a standardized test score in the 24th percentile. These results told me that the decline in social approval was pervasive: even children as young as 9 showed the generational trend, with kids from GenMe scoring lower than kids from earlier generations.

The Baby Boomers, of course, began this trend. In fact, the data show that the need for social approval reached an all-time low in the late 1970s to the early 1980s. This is not that surprising—the Boomers practically invented youth rebellion in the 1960s. By the 1970s, the rebellion was mainstream, and the defiance of authority an accepted social value. Take the line Yippie radical Jerry Rubin used in the late 1970s—if someone called him on the phone when he was otherwise occupied, he would say honestly, "Can't talk to you now—I'm masturbating."

The 1980s, on the other hand, returned society to a somewhat more conventional existence. Slowly, men cut their hair (except for Ponch and Jon on *CHiPs*), pant legs went from flagrantly bell-bottom to normal (at least until their resurgence around 1996), and pot smoking declined. It was not quite as necessary to rebel to fit in—which was always a rather ironic notion anyway. GenMe turned this trend around to an extent, no longer thinking of social approval as something to be completely disdained. But the need for social approval did not even come close to the levels of the 1950s and 1960s—those days were gone forever.

A new movement dawned during the 1980s, however, a trend that Generation Me would take to new heights, leaving Boomers in the dust. Generation Me believes, with a conviction that approaches boredom because it is so undisputed, that the individual comes first. It's the trend that gives the generation its name, and I explore it in the next two chapters.