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BABY BOOMERS-IN-THE-WORLD.

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“You become old when you start giving good advice rather than a bad example”

Baby Boomers are... aged by culture

The term Baby Boomers identifies people born during the post World War II baby boom, between 1946 and 1964. (Wikipedia) They are the first generation to be raised with television and rock and roll, computers and mobile phones. They were witnesses to the first man on the moon, Concorde and the liberalization (at least in the western world) of traditional social roles. In the mid sixties and seventies they fought to change society and to create democracy, equal opportunities and economical stability.

Paradoxically Baby Boomers are also referred to as the “*ME generation*”. This refers to their overall egotistic attitude towards life’s success, freedom of action, pursuit of pleasure, power and everlasting youth. It seems that baby Boomers are striving for immortality. Research published in 2007 reveals that “*Whether it’s hippies, yuppies or — dare we say — retirees, boomers continue to evolve, adapt and ultimately reinvent themselves to fit technology and world events.*” (John Sullivan, 2007)

Most Baby Boomers are now middle aged, and they have to reckon with the fact that they may have become very much like the parents they once rebelled against. While they were at college, society went through a radical change. Identities and traditional values were challenged and new social orders established. Their children, commonly defined as “*Xers*”, are now emerging in society as the new work force, but their quest for employment and careers entails space in the market place and Boomers have often become the Xers enemies, the “*others*”, the “*they*”.

Time keeps speeding up in contemporary society and Baby Boomers are often pushed into early retirement. Yet more often than not Baby Boomers seem to be able to re-cycle themselves and to keep an active place in society. They don’t seem to be willing to embrace old age quietly and often behave like forever adolescents. Age-cohorts like the Boomers or the Xers, become stereotypes of age-classes, people become *subjects-with-age*, (Morganroth Gullette 2004) in a labor market that identifies value with earning capacity.

In this paper I will attempt an observation of Baby Boomers’ experience of ageing. Technology and science that were the best tools to grant happiness and stability in earlier years seem to have taken a course of their own and Baby Boomers may feel that they are becoming enslaved to their own product.

In the practice of psychotherapy we observe our client’s world-view and together we work on sedimentation, assumptions, change and relations. The society we live in and the way we interact with it needs to be observed as it is pivotal for the understanding of our being-with and in relation to. Our society is the product of our parent’s world-view, as well as of our own efforts and it will become inheritance to our children.

Society develops in unison with people’s ageing process – nothing new in this, but at the same time

all is new because this is our very own society, we built it, changed it and we are now able to look back and see how far we have got and what impact we have had on ourselves. We are at the same time subject and object of our own being. Adjusting, keeping track or resisting, are going to be predominant issues in the Baby Boomers retirement years and are themes present in the therapy room.

Starting with an overview of the philosophy that informed the building of contemporary society, I wonder if Nietzsche had indeed acted as a prophet, one hundred years before, and either foreseen or inspired the change that took place.

I refer to two of my clients in order to describe Baby Boomers in action within this environment and in relation to their ageing process. I conclude with my own experience of ageing and understanding of the importance of therapy during the mid-life years.

Heidegger provided me with a philosophical understanding of Dasein in relation to technology and Morganroth Gullette drew an exhausting description of the impact that our culture has on the issue of ageing. Deleuze and Guattari informed my understanding of the “*Desire society*”.

The desire machine.

Baby Boomers grew up at a time when everyone was familiar with Freud, Marx and their parents’ experience of the reality of Fascism. Freud and Marx opened up ideologies of freedom. Psychoanalysis opened up freedom of expression for libido and repressed desires, whilst Marxism advocated freedom from social repression. Fascism on the other hand, remained synonym of political slavery which needed never be allowed again. Looking back fifty years on from post war times to today, it seems that Baby Boomers have

managed to build a society mainly based on a “*technology of desire*” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2003) that brings us back to that subtle fascist ideology that is somehow in most of us and causes us to love power, and desire the very thing that dominates us.

Desire is generated by the lack of something that we want acquire; “...*the real object that desire lacks is related to an extrinsic natural or social production, whereas desire intrinsically produces an imaginary object that functions as a double of reality, as though there were a ‘dreamed-of object behind every object’ or a mental production behind all real production.*” (Deleuze & Guattari 2003:27)

Whether mental or real, everything is production. We all are production machines, we go through a constant process of desiring, acquiring, producing and consuming. We have become machines connected to other machines which in turn are connected to others and so on. The process gathers momentum and it is in continuous flux. It needs to start, run its cycle and break down in order to start again. We seem to have created the need for that which we desire in order to put the process in motion and the desire needs to be renewed at each and every cycle.

Baby Boomers now in their mid-life years may have created what I would call a sort of *social capitalism*. We create the impression that we all can have a share of wealth and power, and yet we have become the victims of such construction. Baby Boomers constitute a specific market target based on age, and based on the desire for youth and physical fitness. In Deleuze and Guattari’s opinion there seems to be no escape from the desire machine production; the only exceptions seem to be the artist, the revolutionary and the visionary. It could be argued that the artist and the visionary are also part of the production machine because they produce art, objects to be desired and vision, as in theories or ideologies that can be acquired and used. It is suggested that freedom lies with the revolutionary, but then that is another label in need of definition.

It seems to me that people who are happiest or at least more content with life are those who possess very little, eat very little, produce very little. There may be some learning in that observation, yet what would happen if the flux of the desire machines suddenly stopped? And with it the connection that links one machine to the next and so on? What if one day we woke up with no desire whatsoever? The production

machine is what keeps us in relation to the world, as well as subordinated to it. Slowing down the production frenzy and stepping sideways from it, without necessarily halting it, may provide an alternative to the problem.

Baby Boomers have developed a society that values technological enterprise in the quest for social stability and affluence which had been denied by the war years. Heidegger states that “*Technology is a mode of revealing.*” (Heidegger,1977:13) The purpose of technology is to bring forth things in nature or work. Technology is a way of revealing something that is potentially already present in the world. Based upon physics and science, technology sets nature in order and unlocks nature’s energy and transforms it, “...*what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is, in turn, distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew. Unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching about are ways of revealing.*” (Heidegger, 1977:16). Man is at the centre of this cycle, yet man only responds to what is needed, he is commanded by profit making, by the creation of wealth.

This vision of man as the one who puts nature in order and satisfies needs, or as we said earlier, creates needs to satisfy so that the production machine can keep rolling, may justify Baby Boomers’ attitude and the advent of a technological and consumer society. A technological society is not necessarily a bad thing, as Heidegger posits, as long as we regard it as an instrument and we do not become subjects to the frenziness of ordering and producing. Technology brings forth man, not the other way round, or at least so it should be.

Man in charge of nature and provider of well-being seems to take over the role of creator. When Nietzsche’s *Madman* exclaimed “*God is dead*” he knew he had come too early. “*‘I come too early’ he said then; ‘my time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering – it has not yet reached the ears of men’.*” (Nietzsche, 1974:119) One hundred years later, in what now seems a prophecy, we can understand by such assertion that our values have indeed changed as far as the relationship with the mystical world is concerned. I don’t think it was a prophecy of doom. Nietzsche believed that humans without God or religious faith could have great possibilities. Relinquishing the belief in the metaphysical allows human creativity to develop and Baby Boomers have indeed taken charge of the world they live in

and replaced the supersensory world with the goal of earthly happiness. Progress, science, material possessions, image, but also freedom from illness and suffering, have opened the way to a new world view and the development of business enterprise.

Heidegger (1977) explains the pronouncement “*God is dead*” as the loss of power of the metaphysical world. Then man has nothing left to cling on, to orient himself by. “*Nihilism is the world-historical movement of the people of the earth who have been drawn into the power realm of modern age.*” (Heidegger, 1977:63) Nihilism can be also understood as the devaluation and replacement of old values with new ones. This establishing, devaluing and re-valuing has become historical, and it represents the “*inner logic*” of the western world.

Baby Boomers have been the protagonists of a society where enhancement, creativity and becoming have interpreted and acted upon this constant flux of values. De-valuing or rejecting the belief in a universal moral law does not mean that Baby Boomers are willing to occupy God’s place, rather they strive to dominate earth and its resources. It is perhaps in this view that we can understand the struggle to stay in power and the resulting competition with the new generation, hungry for work and for their own place in society. Baby Boomers don’t seem to give up their active presence in society. When pushed out of the work force, by redundancy or retirement, they, more often than not, start again on another enterprise. Longevity has created a vast number of middle age people in competition with their children. Research, pharmacology, media, and the idea of being in charge of one’s own fate, have somehow pushed away the awareness of finitude and death. Until, of course, one is forced to acknowledge the ontological anxiety of it.

Transiting into middle age is a delicate step. In order to achieve the full potential of the second part of one’s life preparation is necessary. This is when therapy can be a most useful enterprise. Emmy van Deurzen (1997) describes being in the world as related to four psychological realms. Physical, Social, Personal, Spiritual. If we considered these dimension as cycles in the development of human life or the development of human personality, then mid-life coincides with the Personal dimension. This is a phase where an inward relation needs to be built. Looking at one’s achievements and failures and coming to terms with those, means being willing to tell one’s life story and having the courage to draw conclusion and make

plans from experience. *“Ultimately we all have to manage the contradictions between being merged with a world and having to define a sense of self out of that- finding a way between the world and our own identity.”* (Van Deurzen 1997:122)

Forever adolescents.

When ageing is considered a body issue, and as such a body that declines through time, all other aspects of our being-in-the-world, are discarded. Physical transformation also means life experience and history in progress. Rather than defining human beings by age we could define them by identity.

Baby boomers seem to have created their own decline, in a society where longevity equals progress, and ageing has become synonym of decline. Chronology has become a bureaucratic convenience and a motive for annual celebrations, the media increasingly exploit these automatic sequences for their story of decline. Ageing seems to be classified as an illness, for which there is no cure, only painkillers. If being

young is the best promise to be able to succeed financially, then ageing cannot be other than decline. Can this be true? How can ageing become a universal concept, as if we all aged in the same way and at the same pace? Could ageing become maturation, change, history, seniority? Nothing can be more diverse than the process of ageing; *“The world is full of diversity and non comparability and ageing is another fascinating difference”* (Morganroth Gullette, 2004:9).

If we accept that ageing equals decline, then there is no option but join the commercial anti-ageing rush and accept that ageing becomes, like gender, race and class, a discriminatory factor. Conversely, can we be strong headed enough and stare the process in the face, distrust the commerce in ageing and re-value another aspect: that ageing is progress. The following example in Holly’s vignette shows my client’s attempt to deny her ageing process by mirroring her son’s behavior.

Holly, 52, was referred to me because of an irritating habit of breaking her hair in between her fingernails, making a snapping noise. Her family had had enough and the issue had reached crisis point. A few sessions of CBT were needed to solve the problem. Fifty sessions later, a thorough investigation of Holly’s life philosophy had taken place and the hair-breaking habit had been nearly forgotten. Holly was under continuous stress. A perfectionist, she had to look after her two teenage children, a busy husband and her own freelance business. The death of her mother, a controlling personality, had contributed to Holly’s anxiety and had triggered a long period of angry outbursts at home, usually connected to her son’s rebellious temper. Holly was worried by her own anger and violence, she could no longer match her internalized image of an efficient and organized super mum, with the shouting, swearing and throwing-stuff-about woman she had become.

Interestingly enough, the repetitive narrative of these fights with her son gave us the opportunity to observe how her behavior seemed to mirror her son’s. The two seemed to be feeding off each other, provoking, challenging and breaking all rules of normal good mannered middle class families. Holly was going through her midlife transition as a reborn adolescent. Once that had become clear a new phase started and we slowly expanded into looking at Holly’s own development and values. We had to re-assess what

needed to change and what could be taken on. We went through this cycle of de-valuing, and re-valuing and finally practical changes started to show in her family interactions and her work routine. Holly's quest for perfection and control gave way to the need for space and time for herself and her family. Compromising with her son's needs and allowing a more laid –back attitude toward school and work seemed to contain her anger and frustration. The odd angry outburst was at times accepted as a way to relate, communicate and offload anxiety. Holly's hair-breaking habit was still there, but nobody seemed to notice anymore.

Baby Boomers-in-the-world.

Existential phenomenology proposes that all aspects of human existence are inter-related and relational. The term *being-in-the-world* presupposes a close relation between being and world. If existence is relational, so is ageing, which means that body and its socio-cultural progress are indivisible. Spinelli's (2007) use of the term *Worlding* implies a continuous and ever changing process of being in relation to the world. Even if we decided to focus on one particular aspect of human existence, say one's age, and we wanted to observe and study it from different angles, nevertheless, the concept of age would be ever changing and always of and in the world, or of and in the person whose age we are defining. "*It may 'stand*

out' temporarily as a structural focus point, but it cannot be said that it is no longer part of the world."
(Spinelli 2007:19)

Age cannot be frozen away from the experience of the person and "*Reckoning with time is constitutive for Being-in-the-world.*" (Heidegger 1962:382.). The Aristotelian concept of time as "*...that which is counted in the movement which we encounter within the horizon of the earlier and the later.*" (Heidegger, 1962:473) proposes that the counting happens in the present, in the now, and it is the *nows* that are counted. Time then appears as a sequence of *nows*, of moments which can fluctuate backward or forwards, but always in the present. How can we define age if we embrace this philosophy of time? When I think back to episodes of my childhood I live in a now that ages me as a child. As I plan for future retirement and old age I live in a now that ages me as a much older person. Time seems to be defined by the narrative that occupies our mind or our discourse, as Evelyn's story suggests;

Evelyn, sixty, presented herself as suffering from clinical depression, chronic fatigue, giddiness and monophobia. Her movements, as well as her speech, were extremely slow and she walked with the aid of a stick, although she had no physical disability. Her body is heavy and she seemed constantly out of breath, due to a heart condition. She described her life as lived at the service of a sick, controlling and domineering mother who left her with no private space. An only child, she was never married, she had few friends, most of whom had died in recent years, and was now isolated, ill and worried.

My sessions with Evelyn were mostly focused on her bitterness at lost opportunities, and the grim reality of an old age with no purpose and nobody to care for her. I struggled to stay alert and open, a heavy sense of tiredness and sleepiness seemed to get hold of me and time was just a very long now, that seemed to never end. Whatever her anagraphical age, I was relating to a very old lady; she somehow seemed to have been born old, even when she was describing herself as a child.

Then one day in the midst of her narrative, she suddenly told me of a love affair she had in her youth, with an older, married man. Something suddenly changed, her tone of voice touched a higher pitch, she became animated and for the first time I noticed the perfect spotless skin on her face. But what awoke me

was the sensuous, flirtatious expression of her eyes. Evelyn had suddenly become a beautiful young woman in the midst of a love affair.

She must have noticed my reaction, as I found myself sitting on the edge of my chair, leaning towards her, presumably ruptured by the unforeseen change, because she then swiftly returned to her habitual composure. It was just a glimpse of that other identity, of Evelyn at another age, and it just as suddenly disappeared. I understood then, as I saw this near-miracle in front of my eyes, that age cannot be other than an artificial construct as we fluctuate, through our own narrative, in and out of many, interwoven nows, many selves past or future, that are beyond age-classification.

Other such moments appeared and quickly disappeared during following sessions, and our relationship began to grow, to move, to find a peculiar lightness and rhythm, as if dancing in and out of what society had decided should be her age. If someone asked me Evelyn's age I would have to reply "when?"...

Baby Boomers in therapy.

Since the number of older people has begun to grow, thanks to reduced mortality rates, new questions have to be asked; the system needs to be changed in order to cater for this ageing Baby Boomers' society. While before, when there were less old people, age commanded respect and the elderly were integrated in the family structure, now that respect and family are more of a rarity, old age has become a problem. If we could change the definition of age and time, perhaps people could be valued for their role in society, irrespective of their anagraphical circumstances.

It is interesting to observe Baby Boomers in their middle years and their attitude towards ageing and the mid-life transition. It is in that transition that the tendency to Nihilism, if understood as a sequence or devaluing-and re-valuing, comes to the fore. As mid-life approaches, it is usual for people to experience a deep psycho-physical change and to develop a quest for internal growth which often gives birth to a new spirituality. Once work, family and stability have been achieved or at least pursued, with the advent of the second part of life there is a need for self-analysis and for re-assessing one's values. When this internal development takes place old values are re-assessed and new values are considered in order to create or re-adjust the personality and transit into a new life stage. If this process is recognized and facilitated, one's personality can come to full bloom and a new beginning takes place.

In the last decade or so the need for new forms of spirituality, strongly influenced by eastern disciplines and a new understanding of traditional ways of living, have become the pivotal means for a new approach to ageing. The recent re-valuing of psychotherapy, from a cure for mental illness to a facilitating process for the understanding and establishing of a fulfilling life, could well be the external expression of the Baby Boomers' development into mid-life.

In therapy, the inter-relational construct of body and its context is expressed in the narrative of experience provided by the client, and by the narrative of the relation between client and therapist, as the narrative takes place. *"...relatedness expresses itself; first, through the narratives of the experience of being that are provided by the client and, secondly and no less importantly ,through the psychotherapist's and client's currently lived experience of relatedness as it unfolds.."* (Spinelli, 2007:12)

Narrative in therapy, but also in daily life, defines identity and puts value to one's past. Remembering past events and re-constructing them through narrative, shows that there is more value in memory than oblivion and in trusting time as progress into ageing. Remembering and narrating one's life history as part of therapy, allows the construction of one's story to become the real adventure of time flowing, and builds self-trust in the surviving process. Time is then a friend of recovery, it restores energy and ageing can be something that we can praise rather than fight.

In the past, listening to everyday life stories narrated in the intimacy of one's home (what grandmothers used to do once upon a time), offered a life narrative perspective to young children, in two different ways; because they would learn to tell their own story as well, and thus make up their present identity, and also because they would project along the life of the older person, or in contrast with that, but still project their place in the society of tomorrow. That was progress narrative. Now television or computer games tell stories that belong to others or to fiction. They depict worlds that are already made or unattainable or simply unreal, where there is no space for the listener's creativity, participation or future programming. That is decline narrative.

Age narrative is a construct that enables psyche and embodiment to be observed through time and culture. It then unites all the elements necessary to construct identity in its context, with the description of being-in-the-world. The latest (or oldest) self narrates all the other selves, multiple identities that progressed during the life story, chronologically or not. If we take away the context, social, cultural, gender etc, we are left with an identity that relies solely on age, without history. Then the story can only be one of decline, as age is not going to stop its flight toward death. (Morganroth Gullette, 2004)

The therapeutic encounter offers the opportunity to narrate, remember, observe and unify different acts of one's life performance. It is that unity that enables the client to create his/her future. Imagination, creativity, innovation, go hand in hand with the exploration of lessons learned in the past. Silence and the unwillingness or inability to express fear and anxiety about ageing and death, are also a vital part of the narrative and essential tools for re-designing one's future.

Evelyn used her depression as her business card: here I am, an old, depressed, ill person. Until, through narrative, she allowed herself to shift back to happier times and to bring that happiness in the present moment of therapy. Shifting the emphasis from the older to the younger self, life narrative becomes age identity. Time is used not only as the canvas on which the story unfolds, but also as the healer. Identity is then not only formed or recognized through the narrative but is also changed along with the life course. Identity is the story of ageing and therapy is the facilitator of it. Rather than being addressed as "*beings-who-age*" we should become "*beings-who-progress*" (Morganroth Gullette, 2004:12).

Conclusion:

I was born right in the middle of the Baby Boomer's spread, and as such I can be defined as middle aged. The market has a whole range of cures and products as well as advice on how I can look after my body and life style so that people will greet me with a "*you look ten years younger...*" comment. That is if I accepted that initial definition. But I want to try and challenge it, because the definition itself is a phenomenon to be observed. Age, and my own age in particular, cannot be a horizontal fluid phenomenon. I don't feel the same age all the time. I can be it some of the time, just as I can often be a lot younger or a lot

older, it all depends on the myriad of different ways I am interacting with the world around me, or simply on my memories of past events, or my projection of future possibilities. If time is a continuous movement from past to future and back, then the definition itself cannot be other than an artificial one.

Defining the process of ageing and trying to forecast it, is perhaps an attempt at keeping anxiety at bay. Not knowing how old I will be today or even in the next thirty minutes seems to undermine my whole being, to erase my identity, because I become unquantifiable. Yet I feel that if I stood still on that unknown element and allowed my age to fluctuate freely, then the value will be changed and rather than being an object that can be measured I may be allowed to be a being who exists.

To forego the safety of being quantified, identified and catalogued, takes courage. Tillich (1952) states that death anxiety increases within individualistic societies, while it is lessened in collective structures because the collectivity offers the safety of clear directive, rules and categories. To withdraw from such safety and seek a personal, individualistic understanding of one's personality and relation to the world, takes an act of faith; *"Faith accepts 'in spite'; and out of the 'in spite of' of faith the 'in spite of' of courage is born.... Faith is not an opinion but a stage."* (Tillich, 1952:173).

In spite of fleeing from the reality of my lived years, I am trying to perform that act of faith. It means acceptance of whatever I may be able to do or not do with my future. I have come to like the term mid-lifers, because it defines itself, as it reminds me of someone locked in a prison, serving a life sentence. A mid-lifer is locked inside a definition of age-identity that sounds confined and closed off from the experiential socio-cultural environment. Tillich's act of faith, in my understanding, pushes me towards the courage to decide, live, act, in spite of my ageing.

It is no coincidence that I am today writing this essay, at the end of my training. There was an initial act of faith in this part of my history, when I choose to become a student again and establish a new career, a new place in society. A therapist can work forever - I thought - and the older and wiser, the better. It seemed the ideal solution for my immortality-quest. Little did I know that together with qualifications I was also going to gain something that is truly immortal; the notion that time and its unity makes me feel above definition, frees me from the worldly construction of filing, archiving and categorizing that is so needed in

our insecure society. I feel I can raise above all that and feel free to die when the time comes. Or, in true Baby Boomer's style, if and when I want.

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