Generation Me

Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled and More Miserable Than Ever Before

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You Can Be Anything You Want to Be

B eginning in May 2005, high school students faced a completely revamped SAT college entrance exam. Its most prominent feature is an essay portion designed to measure students' writing ability. Instead of asking for a balanced treatment of a topic, however, the test asks the student to "develop your point of view on this issue." This means that to get a high score, it's necessary to argue only one side of the question: yours. As the test-prep book *Kaplan New SAT 2005* advises, "What's important is that you take a position and state how you feel. It is not important what other people might think, just what you think."

Generation Me has always been taught that our thoughts and feelings are important. It's no surprise that students are now being tested on it. Even when schools, parents, and the media are not specifically targeting self-esteem, they promote the equally powerful concepts of socially sanctioned self-focus, the unquestioned importance of the individual, and an unfettered optimism about young people's future prospects. This chapter explores the consequences of individualism that go beyond self-esteem, and all of the ways that we consciously and unconsciously train children to expect so much out of life. High school senior Scot, a contestant on the reality show *The Scholar*, captured this notion when he said, "I feel it's very important to be your own hero." So forget presidents, community leaders, even sports figures—it's more important to look up to yourself.

Like self-esteem, self-focus and individuality have been actively promoted in schools. When I was in sixth grade in Irving, Texas, our fall assignment in Reading was a project called "All About Me." We finished

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A page from my "All About Me" project in 6th grade Reading class, fetchingly illustrated with cutouts from magazine ads. The project promoted the idea that thinking about yourself is very important apparently more important than reading and writing, given the uncorrected spelling mistake.

sentences like "I feel angry when . . . " and "Something special I want you to know about me is . . ." We were also asked to include pictures of ourselves. Many of my classmates spent hours on this project, mulling over their answers and making elaborate albums with their best photographic self-portraits. In effect, we were graded on how well we could present our opinions and images of ourselves. Later that year, our assignment was to make a personal "coat of arms" that illustrated our interests and hobbies. In the past, a coat of arms was the symbol of an entire extended family, so an individual coat of arms—particularly one created by an elevenyear-old—is an interesting cultural construct. My school was not the only one to value and promote children's individual feelings and thoughts. The popular school program called Quest has students keep track of their feelings for a day on an "Emotion Clock" or a "Mood Continuum." Andrea, 22, told me that her junior high and high school English classes included weekly "free writing." She notes, "This not only encouraged writing but pushed expressing yourself." Even employers are getting in on the game: Xerox's new recruiting slogan is "Express Yourself."

The growing primacy of the individual appears in data I gathered on 81,384 high school and college students. These young people completed questionnaires measuring what psychologists call agency—a personality trait involving assertiveness, dominance, independence, and self-promotion. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, both young men's and women's agency increased markedly, with the average 1990s college student scoring higher than 75% of college Boomers from the 1970s. I had expected women's agency to increase over this time, but men's feelings of agency also rose, suggesting that the trend went beyond gender roles. As the Boomers gave way to GenMe, more and more young people were saying that they stood up for their individual rights, had a "strong personality," and were "self-sufficient" and "individualistic." So GenMe not only has high self-esteem, but we take pride in being independent actors who express our needs and wants.

The focus on the needs of the individual self begins when children are very young, sometimes before they are born or even conceived. Advertising convinces parents to spend lots of money on the perfect nursery, since the room should "reflect" the child's personality and individuality. (Yet, as *The Mommy Myth* by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels points out, "remember, kid not born yet, personality unknown.") One of the most popular nursery decorations right now is 12-inch-tall letters spelling out the child's name, an obvious bow to individualism. Douglas and Michaels refer to the trends toward perfection and individuality in nurseries as our "narcissism around our kids . . . a hyperindividualized emphasis on how truly, exquisitely unique and precious our child is, the Hope diamond, more special than the others."

We also promote individuality and self-importance by giving our children choices. One of my psychology colleagues called me one day and said, "You know, I just realized how kids learn this self stuff so quickly. I

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just asked my 1-year-old if she wanted apple juice or milk. Earlier today I asked her if she wanted to wear her red dress or her blue one. She can't even talk and I'm asking her what she wants!" My friend is not alone in asking his daughter such questions; most American parents begin asking their children their preferences before they can answer. When kids get a little older, many parents think it's important to let their children pick out the clothes they wear in the morning—the kid might end up wearing red polka dots with green and blue stripes, but it's OK because they are "expressing themselves" and learning to make their own choices.

Culture Shock! USA, a guidebook to American culture for foreigners, explains: "Often one sees an American engaged in a dialogue with a tiny child. 'Do you want to go home now?' says the parent. 'No,' says an obviously tired, crying child. And so parent and child continue to sit discontentedly in a chilly park. 'What is the matter with these people?' says the foreigner to himself, who can see the child is too young to make such decisions." It's just part of American culture, the book says: "The child is acquiring both a sense of responsibility for himself and a sense of his own importance." We expect our kids to have individual preferences and would never dream, as earlier generations did, of making every single decision for our children and asking them to be seen and not heard. Not coincidentally, this also teaches children that their wants are the most important.

This can sometimes cause problems when children get older. One mother says she treated her daughter "as if she had a mind of her own ever since she was a baby," asking her what she wanted to do next and what she wanted to wear. "But now that's she's 4, sometimes I really want her to mind me. The other day I told her, 'Alexis, you're going to do this right now because I say so!' She looked up at me astounded, as if to say, 'What's going on here? You're changing the rules on me!'" And just wait until she's 14.

Perhaps as a result, some experts maintain that more kids these days are behaving badly. Psychologist Bonnie Zucker, interviewed for a *People* magazine article on "Kids Out of Control," saw a 10-year-old whose parents let him decide whether or not to go to school—if he didn't want to go, he didn't go. Another mother didn't make her son do homework because it made him "unhappy." Other children scream at their parents when their oatmeal is lumpy or openly call their parents "freak" or "retard." Writer Martin Booe recently devoted an entire column to overindulgent parents who "let their kids run roughshod over themselves and other adults... they're rampant." Says educational psychologist Michele Borba: "Too many parents subscribe to the myth that if you discipline children, you're going to break their spirits... The 'Me Generation' is raising the 'Me-Me-Me Generation.'"

Douglas and Michaels argue that because mothers are now expected to understand their child's inner feelings and wants, the child comes to believe "that he's the center of the universe, his thoughts and feelings the only ones worth considering, the ones that cut in line before everyone else's." Gone are the days, they say, when parents were told to "disabuse [their child] of the notion that he or she is the Sun King." These days, watch *Supernanny* or *Nanny 911* and you'll see a screen full of screaming and defiant Sun Kings.

Paula Peterson's two kids, Abby and Joey, throw temper tantrums when they don't get the toys they want. And why does she put up with such behavior? Well, as the *People* article explains, "the same spark that sets off the kicking and screaming may also give Abby and Joey what they need to excel in **a culture** that rewards outspokenness and confidence." Peterson says she'd rather have kids who are "strong-willed and say what they want" than "kids who are bumps on logs." Another parent says of his son, "I don't want Holden to just be a well-behaved child. I want him to feel he has control and choices." As *Culture Shock! USA* explains, "In most of the countries of the world, parents feel that their obligation is to raise an obedient child who will fit into society. The little ego must be molded into that of a well-behaved citizen. Not so here [in the U.S.]. ... the top priority is to raise an individual capable of taking advantage of opportunity."

It's easy to see how these values can quickly lead to disaster. A recent article in *Time* magazine asked, "Does Kindergarten Need Cops?" After being told to surrender a toy, one kindergartner screamed, knocked over her desk, and threw books at the other kids. Another 6-year-old told his teacher to "Shut up, bitch." A report from the Tarrant County, Texas, school district found that 93% of 39 schools agreed that kindergartners have "more emotional and behavioral problems" than they did five years ago. While it's difficult to tell if this can be traced back to kids having their own way at home, it's certainly one possibility. The youngest members of GenMe are, apparently, taking self-importance to a whole other level.

Sometimes the flip side of this equation occurs when a child ends up fending for herself because a parent has to work long hours, or is depressed **about** a divorce. This situation, obviously, does not lead to the narcissistic self-centeredness that overindulgence does. Instead, it leads to an independent, self-reliant individualism, but individualism nonetheless. **Jerry's** parents divorced when he was 11. As a consequence, he says in Emerging Adulthood, "I grew up on my own. I mean, my mom was there, **but** when you deal with things, you have to take care of yourself. . . . I always know that I can count on myself, and that's what it comes down to. You've got to be able to count on yourself, and then you can count on others." Dealing with a parental divorce was a pretty common experience for much of GenMe-more of us have divorced parents than any other generation in history. Another large segment of the generation grew up (or is growing up) with a single parent, usually the mother. These family compositions often create very independent, self-sufficient children, confident in their ability to get by on their own. This can be useful, but it also mults in self-importance. What kind of environment leads to less selfimportant children? The happy medium, where kids aren't self-reliant miniadults, but are also not overindulged or taught to think that the world revolves around them.

ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE: NEVER GIVE UP ON YOUR DREAMS

In his book What Really Happened to the Class of '93, Chris Colin notes that his classmates were constantly told "You can be whatever you want to be" and "Nothing is impossible." His interviewees mention this time and time again. "I was told, growing up, that I could do whatever I wanted, and I fully believed I could," said one. Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner, authors of *Quarterlife Crisis*, agree: "For all of their lives, twentysomethings have been told that they can be whatever they want to be, do whatever they want to do." Lia Macko, the coauthor of a similar book (*Midlife Crisis at 30*), dedicates the work to her mother, "for truly instilling in me the belief that Anything Is Possible," which she describes as "the unqualified mantra of our youth." These messages begin early. When the boy band 'N Sync appeared on the kids' show *Sesame Street*, they sang a song called "Believe in Yourself." Some people might tell you there are things you can't do, the song says. But you can be whatever you want to be, as long as you "believe in yourself." (What if they want to be brats?) One of the most popular Barney (the annoying purple dinosaur) videotapes for toddlers promotes a similar message: it's called *You Can Be Anything*!

And so it goes, into high school as well. Joey, a character in the teen soap *Dawson's Creek*, was usually portrayed as realistic and disillusioned; after all, her mother died a few years ago and her father is in prison. But after she paints a mural for the high school hallway in a 1998 episode, she says, "We could all use a daily reminder that, if you believe in yourself, even when the odds seem stacked against you, anything's possible." So much for realism. (Notice, too, the automatic connection between "anything's possible" and "believe in yourself.") It's not surprising, though, because the logical outcome of every kid having high self-esteem is every kid thinking that he can achieve anything. In a recent survey, a stunning 98% of college freshmen agreed with the statement, "I am sure that one day I will get to where I want to be in life."

One professor encountered this GenMe attitude quite spectacularly in an undergraduate class at the University of Kansas. As she was introducing the idea that jobs and social class were based partially on background and unchangeable characteristics, her students became skeptical. That can't be right, they said: you can be anything you want to be. The professor, a larger woman with no illusions about her size, said, "So you're saying that I could be a ballerina?" "Sure, if you really wanted to," said one of the students.

This ethos is reflected in the lofty ambitions of modern adolescents. In 2002, 80% of high school sophomores said they expected to graduate from a four-year college, compared to 59% just twelve years before in 1990. In the late 1960s, by comparison, only 55% of high school seniors thought they would attend college at all, much less graduate. High schoolers also predict they will have prestigious careers. Seventy percent of late-1990s high school students expected to work in professional jobs, compared to 42% in the 1960s. Unfortunately, these aspirations far outstrip the need for professionals in the future. In *The Ambitious Generation*, sociologists Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson label these "mis**aligned ambitions**." In other words, the kids have learned the lesson "you **can** be whatever you want to be" a little too well, as there probably won't **be enough desirable** jobs for everyone to be whatever he wants to be.

Ambitions grow stronger once young people enter college. In 2003, an incredible 3 out of 4 American college freshmen said that they wanted to earn an advanced degree (such as a master's, Ph.D., M.D., or law degree). For example, 39% say they will earn a master's degree, 19% a Ph.D., and 12% an M.D. Grand ambitions indeed, since the number of Ph.D.'s granted each year is only 4% of the bachelor's degrees given, and M.D.'s only 1%. Thus about 4 in 5 aspiring Ph.D.'s will be disappointed, and a whopping 11 in 12 would-be doctors will not reach their goals. And that's if you finish your bachelor's degree at all; figures are hard to nail down, but the discrepancy between college enrollment and bachelor's degrees suggests that less than 50% of entering college students finish their degrees within 5 years. During the next decade, we are going to see a lot of young people who will be disappointed that they cannot reach their career goals.

Young people also expect to make a lot of money. In 1999, teens predicted that they would be earning, on average, \$75,000 a year by the time they were 30. The average income of a 30-year-old that year?—\$27,000, or around a third of the teens' aspirations. Ray, 24, recently got his masters' degree and expects to land a high-paying job right away. "I don't want to have all those years of education and make only \$60,000 a year," he scoffs. Of course, most starting salaries are much lower than that, even with a master's. Overall, young people predict a bright future for themselves. Sixty-five percent of high school seniors in 2000 predicted that their lives would be better than their parents'; only 4% thought their lives would be worse. Adults surveyed at the same time were much less optimistic, with only 29% saying that high school seniors would have better lives, and 32% predicting a worse outcome. One young employee told a startled manager that he expected to be a vice president at the company within three years. When the manager told him this was not realistic (most vice presidents were in their sixties), the young man got angry with him and said, "You should encourage me and help me fulfill my expectations."

Even the vice presidency of the company might not be good enough if the job is not "fulfilling." *Financial Times* writer Thomas Barlow notes that "the idea has grown up, in recent years, that work should not be just . . . a way to make money, support a family, or gain social prestige but should provide a rich and fulfilling experience in and of itself. Jobs are no longer just jobs; they are lifestyle options." Many twentysomethings interviewed in *Quarterlife Crisis* agreed, like one young woman, that if "she wasn't both proud of and fulfilled by her job, then it was not a job worth having." Several interviewees were looking to quit their jobs, including one young man who wanted to quit his "dream" job working on Capitol Hill because "it's not fulfilling." Shannon, 27, sees this as an obvious sign of generational change. "Most of my friends would like a 'calling' to do something they are passionate about. But I can't imagine a 1950s businessman worked up about whether his job fulfilled him."

Rosa, 24, interviewed in the book *Emerging Adulthood*, thinks she would not like either of her parents' professions (her mother is an optician and her father travels around the world doing maintenance on large ships). "I knew I wanted to be somewhere that I would grow as a person, and I don't see [my parents] growing as individuals," she said. The book also tells the story of Charles, 27, a Princeton graduate who thought about becoming a psychologist or a lawyer but instead is in a band called the Jump Cats, which he describes as "a rock band without instruments." "Music is where my heart is," he says. "I didn't want to regret not going for something that would ultimately bring me more satisfaction." In the future, he also expects to pursue other avenues, such as writing novels and screenplays.

Related to "you can be anything" is "follow your dreams"—like selffocus, a concept that GenMe speaks as a native language. An amazing number of the young people interviewed in *Quarterlife Crisis* adhered fiercely to this belief. Derrick, struggling to be a comedy writer in Hollywood, says, "Never give up on your dreams. If you're lucky enough to actually have one, you owe it to yourself to hold onto it." Robin, a 23year-old from Nebraska, says, "Never give up on your dreams. Why do something that won't bring about your dreams? Life is short enough don't waste it working in a job that doesn't drive you." I was pretty well indoctrinated myself: the title of my high school valedictory speech was "Hold Fast to Dreams."

Why are dreams so important to GenMe? It's the self, as usual. "I want

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No wonder kids have such big dreams—even cheese is supposed to make them sports stars. The ad might be more accurate if the kid were standing on a hypodermic needle filled with steroids.

to write for sitcoms," says Brandon, 24. "I wouldn't be satisfied with myself if I didn't try to do something I'm passionate about," Lara, 29, posted on an Internet board for mothers (she has a toddler and is expecting her second child). She says that someday she would like to be a college professor and teach English literature. "I think I need to start putting myself first and start making my dreams a reality," she wrote.

Some people might argue that this is just youthful hope—after all, hasn't every generation dreamed big during adolescence? Maybe, but CENMe's dreams are bigger. While our parents may have aimed simply to have their small town, or to go to college, we want to make lots of money at a career that is fulfilling and makes us famous. *American Idol* contestant David Brown, 20, has a bet with his mother and younger brother on which of them will become a millionaire first. "I'm about to win [the bet]," he said in February 2005. A few weeks later, Brown was voted off the show, finishing seventeenth out of twenty-four finalists.

"Following your dreams" sounds like a good principle, until you real, ize that every waiter in L.A. is following his or her dreams of becoming an actor, and most of them won't succeed. Most people are not going to realize their dreams, because most people do not dream of becoming accountants, social workers, or trash collectors—just to name three jobs that society can't do without but nevertheless factor into few childhood fantasies. And few dream of the white-collar jobs in business that many of us have or will have. "No one at my company is following his dream," says one of my friends who works in marketing.

The most common dreams of young people are acting, sports, music, and screenwriting. In 2004, a national survey found that more college freshmen said they wanted to be an "actor or entertainer" than wanted to be a veterinarian, a dentist, a member of the clergy, a social worker, an architect, or work in the sales department of a business. Music was just as popular as acting, and even more said they wanted to be artists. Almost 1 out of 20 college students expects to become an actor, artist, or musician, more than want to be lawyers, nurses, accountants, business owners, journalists, or high school teachers.

GenMe also holds on to dreams more fiercely, and in a way that makes you wonder how we will react if we don't achieve our lofty goals. Sharon, 22, began her graduate school application essay by writing, "On my 70th birthday, I want to be able to reflect on my life and say 'I followed my dreams and lived for my passions.' In other words, I will not be discouraged by closed doors, and will not be denied the opportunity to live to my fullest potential." Emily, 22, apparently believes that denial will solve all problems. Interviewed in *Quarterlife Crisis*, she says that if a young person "never gives up, then he or she will never have to admit to failure." Uh-huh. But you might have to live in your car.

The book does discuss one young person who "decided to change his dream rather than accept failure." Mark, 29, tried for years to make it as an actor in New York; he realizes now he should have moved to L.A.

sooner, where "I bet I would have been cast on a soap opera." He finally decided to give up on acting and pursue another career. His new, and presumably more realistic, choice? To be a movie director. (I am not making this up, and the book's authors, both twentysomethings themselves, present this story without comment or irony.)

Mark's story illustrates another change from previous generations: the length of time GenMe has to pursue dreams. Because we expect to marry and have children later, it's more acceptable to spend your entire twenties pursuing "dream" careers like music, screenwriting, or comedy. Jeffrey Arnett calls that period emerging adulthood, a time when "no dreams have been permanently dashed, no doors have been firmly closed, every possibility for happiness is still alive." That period is getting longer and longer for people who spend years trying to make it in Hollywood or attempting to get their first novel published. Many twentysomethings struggle with the decision to keep pursuing their dream, or to cut their losses and go home. More and more young people are going to find themselves at 30 without a viable career, a house, or any semblance of stability.

Although some dreams can be beneficial, others are clearly thwarting more realistic goals. Arnett describes Albert, who works in an ice-cream store but says he really wants to play professional baseball. Yet he did not play baseball in high school and does not play on a team right now either. So how will he make this happen? "I don't know," he says. "I'll see what happens." Adrianne, 16, dreamed of being on American Idol. But, her mother says, "Unfortunately she was so focused on it that she didn't care for school too much." Some dreams are not just big but huge. "My big goal is to have a shoe named after me, like Michael Jordan or LeBron James," says Corvin Lamb, 13, interviewed in *People* magazine. "I want to be something in life."

Even staid publications like *Kiplinger's Personal Finance* promote the **purs**uit of dreams. In 1996, 2002, and 2004, the magazine ran articles on "Dream Jobs," with the 2004 article adding "(and How to Get One)." **Am**ong other enviable professions, the article profiles a batting-practice **pitcher** for the San Francisco Giants, a Harry Winston Jewelry employee **w**ho lends diamond necklaces to celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow, and a **guy** who gets paid to play with Legos as a builder for Legoland Park. The

article advises, "People who love their work don't just sit around, waiting to get lucky. . . . Sometimes they happen to be in the right place to take advantage of an opportunity. More often, however, they take the initiative to put themselves in the right place so they can create their own opportunities." So if you can't get one of these jobs, you're just not trying hard enough. A sidebar offers tips on how to do this; the suggestions include a networking club with a \$600 initiation fee and an image makeover firm that charges \$150 an hour.

Movies have latched onto "never give up on your dreams" with a vengeance. I like to say that modern movies have only four themes: "Believe in yourself and you can do anything," "We are all alike underneath," "Love conquers all," and "Good people win." (Do try this at home; almost every recent movie fits one of the four.) All of these themes tout the focus on the self so common today; in fact, it is downright stunning to realize just how well movies have encapsulated the optimistic, individualistic message of modern Western culture. Romantic love with a partner of one's choice (often opposed by one's parents) always wins in the end; intolerance is always bad; and when you believe in yourself, you can do anything. Sure enough, people who pursue an impossible dream in a movie almost always succeed: Rudy gets to play Notre Dame football, formerly broke single mother Erin Brockovich wins her million-dollar lawsuit, and the underdog 1980 U.S. hockey team achieves the Miracle of* beating the Russians. Former Hollywood producer Elisabeth Robinson tried to get the classic and very sad story of Don Quixote made into a movie, but the studio insisted he win the duels he loses in the book and that "he dies in his bed because he's an old man-who lived his dream and now can die-not because his dreams have been crushed or 'reality' has killed him." It wouldn't be a movie if it wasn't an "inspirational" story of people never giving up-so what if it cuts the heart out of the world's first novel? No one wants to watch a movie more like real life, where people try hard but fail more often than they succeed.

At least GenMe doesn't want to watch this type of movie; previous generations liked them just fine. Take the 1946 film *It's a Wonderful Life*, where George Bailey gives up on his dreams of making it big to stay in his small town and run the local bank. After one particularly bad day, he decides to kill himself, but an angel stops him by showing him how all of his good deeds have benefited others. Many people love this movie for its **mess**age that self-sacrifice can lead to good outcomes. I saw *It's a Wonder***ful** *Life* for the first time when I was 18, and I hated it, probably because **it violated** the conventions of every other movie I had ever seen: Why **doubt** he have to give up his dreams? He should be able to pursue his **ambi**tions, and—modern movies had taught me well—he could have **won** if he had tried hard enough.

The message comes across even in somewhat unlikely sources. In a **2004** episode of *7th Heaven*, one of the few relatively conservative, **G**-rated shows on television, 21-year-old Lucy gives a sermon to the **young** women in the congregation. "God wants us to know and love our**relves**," she says. "He also wants us to know our purpose, our passion. ... So I ask you ... 'What have you dreamt about doing? ... What you **re** waiting for is already inside of you. God has already equipped us with **everything** we need to live full and rich lives. It is our responsibility to **make** that life happen—to make our dreams happen." So if you want to **da.it**, you can make it happen. But what if your dream is to be a movie **tar** or an Olympic athlete? Or even a doctor? What if we're not actually **equipped** with absolutely everything we need—say, a one-in-a-million **body**, Hollywood connections, or the grades to make it into med school?

A website sponsored by the National Clearinghouse on Families and fouth (a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Sersices) also displays this trend toward flagrantly unrealistic optimism. In Express Yourself: A Teenager's Guide to Fitting In, Getting Involved, Finding Yourself," teens are told that their experiences will differ depending on their background, since some kids don't have support from family and live in neighborhoods without "opportunities." "But no matter what pur experience, you can still figure out how to be happy, it states in bold print. (While living in the ghetto with no support from your family?! Sure.) After some useful advice about youth organizations and friends, the website says cheerily, "Believe in yourself. You can't compare yourthete others." Really? Everyone else will, from college admissions to job interviews, so you might as well start now. The website concludes with a tatement that leaves no doubt about its individualistic message: "YOU ARE UNIQUE!" it emphasizes in all caps.

Though I'm sure some teens gain hope from such advice, I worry that why others will emerge with little armor to protect themselves when mgs aren't so sugarcoated. Real life will intervene sometime. The kids whom the website is trying to reach the most—those without good family support who come from underprivileged backgrounds—probably realized that a long time ago. Learning to believe in yourself doesn't help much when your mom is addicted to crack and you're afraid to walk home from school. And as the research presented earlier shows, believing in yourself might not even help you get better grades or stay out of trouble.

THE BRIEF BUT HILARIOUS REIGN OF WILLIAM HUNG

One of the more humorous products of this system has to be William Hung, the UC Berkeley engineering student who stretched his fifteen minutes of fame to almost an hour in early 2004 with his spectacularly bad and uproariously funny rendition of Ricky Martin's "She Bangs." Hung's singing was tuneless, but it was his jerky, utterly uncoordinated dancing that caused the American Idol judges to hide discreetly behind their ratings sheets as they choked back their laughter. When judge Simon Cowell stopped him from finishing, Hung looked surprised and hurt. Cowell chided him: "You can't sing; you can't dance. What do you want me to say?" Hung replied, "I already gave my best. I have no regrets at all."

Judge Paula Abdul praised him, saying, "That's good, that's the **best** attitude yet." (Rule of the modern world: Doing your best is good enough, even if you suck.) Hung then attempted to explain: "I have **no** professional training." "There's the surprise of the century," Cowell shot back.

In a later interview with *Star* magazine, Hung said he hopes to make a career out of being a singer. This was after the poor guy had become **a** national joke for *not* being able to sing. It's especially ironic since **he** probably has a perfectly good career ahead of him as an engineer. But **he** had done his best and had learned the lesson that "you can be anything." Sure enough, when asked if he had any advice for his fans, Hung said, "I want to say something to the public: Always try your best, and don't give up on your dreams." William, please, for the sake of all of us, give up on your dream of being a singer. Simon Cowell, the British American Idol judge who first gave Hung is advice, sees unflinching criticism as his personal mission. TV critic mes Poniewozik notes that Cowell "has led a rebellion against the ranny of self-esteem that is promoted on talk shows and in self-help toks—the notion that everyone who tries deserves to win." Although twell admittedly takes things a little far, Americans think he's mean tostly because he bursts contestants' bubbles of unsubstantiated selfmen. Even the nicer American Idol judges are surprised by the hubris of any of the hopefuls. "It's mind-boggling how horrific some of them are, specially those] with unbelievably healthy egos [thinking] they are all hat," said Paula Abdul. "Kenny [Loggins] said, 'Is it sick or healthy to alk around believing in yourself so much?' I said, 'Well, it's delusional.'" tare is, but it's also young people doing precisely what they have been anght.

WE WILL ALL BE FAMOUS

thung is not very unusual: much of GenMe expects to be famous. Many fids today grow up thinking that they will eventually be movie stars, ports figures, or at least rich. These are the adults they see on television; ardly anybody on TV works in a white-collar job in an office like most fids will do someday. A lot of young people also assume that success will tome quickly. One of my students, who wasn't more than 22, noted during a class presentation that "there are lots of people our age who are CEOs of their own companies." He probably read a profile or two of one of these rare beasts in a magazine and, fueled by the "you can be anything" mythos, decided that this was commonplace.

These attitudes are pervasive and have been for a while. When I was in high school, one of my friends decided to collect items from each of the talented people in our class—a tape of one student playing the piano, a mathematical proof from another, a set of handwritten poems from me. He was sure we would all become famous one day and these would then be worth money (and this was *before* eBay). The three of us have done fne, but none of us is famous. Somehow no one ever told us that this was unlikely to happen. Given the choice between fame and contentment, 29% of 1990s young people chose fame, compared to only 17% of Boomers. Many reality TV shows feed on this obsession with celebrity and fame. Flip channels for a few minutes during prime time, and you'll see *Survivor* contestants barely getting enough food, *Fear Factor* participants with bugs crawling all over them, and *Rebel Billionaire* CEO wannabes falling off cliffs. Why do people do these crazy things? Ostensibly, it's for the challenge and the money, but everyone knows the real attraction: You get on TV. For many people—particularly GenMe—instant fame is worth eating bugs.

In August 2005, the trend got its own cable channel, called Current TV. Aimed specifically at the 18 to 34 demographic, the channel airs video segments sent in by young viewers. The idea is that young people will watch something that offers the tantalizing possibility of attaining their fifteen minutes of fame—and lets them define the news. Al Gore, one of the network's founders, says that the channel aims to move away from the model of only a few people making programming to "a democratized medium where everybody has a chance to learn how to make television." Or to be heard and be famous. As a *New York Times* article about the channel put it, "Reality television has spawned a generation of viewers who feel entitled to be on camera."

Musician Nellie McKay, 19, illustrates this GenMe trend. Although she flunked out of music college, she said in 2004, "I've been telling [my friends] for years that I'm going to be famous. When I look at me in the mirror, I see someone on the front cover of Us Weekly." Even with a first album that sold moderately well, this is the quest for fame at its most bald and unrealistic. "Apparently everyone else sees a regular girl. I'm very disappointed in that," McKay continues. "I want them to see me as Frank Sinatra or Bill Clinton." Apparently, this fame is also supposed to happen overnight. "It tends to get on my nerves when people say, 'Wow, can you believe this is happening to you?" says McKay. "I say 'Yeah, I've worked hard for this.'" Perhaps, but how hard, for how many years, can you have possibly worked when you are nineteen years old?

In What Really Happened to the Class of '93, Chris Colin relates the story of his most accomplished classmate, Alo Basu, who went to Harvard and MIT and was a science prodigy in high school. Their senior year, she was voted most likely to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine. "Ten years after leaving high school, Alo has yet to grace *Time*," he notes, with no sarcasm that I could detect. Um, yes: Most people—even most

geniuses—won't *ever* be on the cover of *Time* magazine, much less before **the** age of 28.

The quest for fame may explain the recent fascination with over-thetop weddings, and why, in general, Americans still have weddings when living together is so popular. Having a dress fit specifically for you, having someone else apply your makeup, having everyone admire your beauty—as author Carol Wallace points out, these are experiences usually shared by only two groups of women: celebrities and brides. Wedding vendors often emphasize that this is your one chance to be a "princess for a day," and we believe it. One bride said, "Finally, I got center stage in something." Finally. As Wallace writes, "Having 'center stage,' being the focus of all eyes is so highly prized in today's culture that many of us, relegated to the background, feel diminished until we get our turn in the spotlight." Gwyneth Paltrow said that for many women "the whole wedding fantasy [is] their day at the Oscars."

Ordinary people can also find a taste of fame on the Internet. Anyone can put up a Web page, start a LiveJournal (LJ), or post to message boards. Blogs are built around the idea that everyone wants to hear your thoughts. Had a bad day? Tell the world about it on LJ. Proud of your athletic ability, your family, your hobbies, your witty writing? Create your own Web page. Allison Ellis, who moderates a chat room for teenagers, says, "I think everyone deserves a chance to express themselves and be important." At least Web pages can't sing.

Perhaps because of our comfort with the spotlight, today's young people are more confident in their social interactions. As part of my dissertation, I gathered data on 16,846 college students who completed a questionnaire measuring extraversion, or being outgoing and talkative. This trait rose markedly, with the average 1990s college student scoring as more extraverted than 83% of students in the 1960s. Compared to Boomers, GenMe is more comfortable talking to people at parties and social occasions, more confident when meeting new people, and accustomed to being surrounded by bustle and excitement. This makes sense: GenMe is more likely to have gone to day care, to have worked in a service job, or to meet new people on a regular basis. High levels of extraversion have been our adaptation: We are a generation with few shrinking violets.

GENERATION ME

YOU MUST LOVE YOURSELF BEFORE YOU CAN LOVE OTHERS

This is one of the most widely accepted of our cultural aphorisms. After 20/20 aired a segment on self-esteem programs in schools, anchor Hugh Downs asked, "Could it be that self-esteem, real self-esteem, comes from esteeming other people and not thinking so much about yourself, to begin with?" Barbara Walters clearly thought he was deluded. "Oh, Hugh!" she exclaimed, as if he had just said the silliest thing in the world. "First of all, you have to like yourself before you can like others."

The 7th Heaven episode mentioned previously also promoted the "love yourself first" message. Lucy, 21 and just named associate pastor, uses the example of the woman from the Song of Solomon. "She loves who she is and she doesn't care what anybody thinks of her," she preaches. "She has self-love and self-esteem." So many of us, she goes on to say, make "loving ourselves dependent on something outside of ourselves. But it's not someone else's job to make us happy. It's your job to make yourself happy. And to know who you are. And if you don't know yourself, or love yourself, how can you expect someone else to?"

There are a number of problems with this. First, if you truly don't care what anybody thinks of you, you're probably not relationship material. And if we could all be happy alone, why be in a relationship at all? Also, plenty of people in earlier generations loved their spouses and children quite a bit, even though they never worried much about loving themselves. Lower rates of divorce in previous decades might even suggest that they were better at relationships than we are. Maybe we love ourselves a little too much.

But pop psych teaches us otherwise. "No person can be happy with others until they are happy with themselves," says Lindsay, 19. It is now commonly accepted that you should have your own life and develop your own identity first, before you settle down with someone. You're supposed to date lots of people and find out who's right for you before you marry someone. As Jeffrey Arnett notes in *Emerging Adulthood*, "finding a love partner in your teens and continuing in a relationship with that person through your early twenties, culminating in marriage, is now viewed as unhealthy, a mistake, a path likely to lead to disaster." Anyone who considers this will hear "Why marry the first guy you date? You should have fun first," "Don't you want your own identity first?" and "How do you know he's the one if you've never dated anyone else?" This might be good advice, but these are new questions, rarely asked just two decades ago. Even compromises made later in one's twenties are scrutinized. One article describes Kathryn, 29, who, to the consternation of her friends, moved to England to be with her boyfriend. "We're not meant to say: 'I made this decision for this person.' Today, you're meant to do things for yourself," she says. "If you're willing to make sacrifices for others—especially if you're a woman—that's seen as a kind of weakness."

Even breaking up is supposed to be good for us—after all, then we can focus on ourselves. "Women in relationships tend to lose a piece of themselves, and when they move out on their own, they tend to find themselves," says psychotherapist Dr. Karen Gail Lewis, quoted in Us Weekly. "It's common to get a huge amount of energy, feel better about yourself and take on new things." A huge amount of research soundly refutes this-breakups lead to depression, not "energy"-but it's classic "you must love yourself first" pop psychology. Maybe Dr. Lewis has watched too much TV. On a 1998 episode of the teen soap Dawson's Creek, Joey broke up with Dawson because, she says, "You make me so happy, but I have to make myself happy first." On MTV's Real World: Philadelphia in 2005, Shavonda got caught cheating on her boyfriend, and they broke up. "I know I'm going to be by myself. That's the price I'm paying to figure out who I am right now," she says. "I just want to start working on, you know, being there for myself, rather than seeking a man to be there for me."

This is the dirty little secret of modern life: We are told that we need to know ourselves and love ourselves first, but being alone sucks. Our ultimate value is not to depend on anyone else. "Commitments imply dependency," writes Jerry Rubin in *Growing (Up) at Thirty-Seven*. "A lover is like an addiction.... [I will] learn to love myself enough so that I do not need another to make me happy." But the truth is that human buings do need other people to be happy—this is just the way we are built. Yet say this at a cocktail party, and someone will probably say yes, sure, but it's better not to *need* someone. That's co-dependent, the resident psychotherapy expert will say, and will repeat the modern aphorism "You can't expect someone else to make you happy—you have to make yourself happy." Actually, you *can* expect this: having a stable marriage is one

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of the most robust predictors of happiness. We gain self-esteem from our relationships with others, not from focusing on ourselves. In other words, Hugh Downs was right. Study after study shows that people who have good relationships with friends and family are the happiest—these things consistently trump money or job satisfaction as predictors of happiness and life satisfaction. Even Abraham Maslow, the favorite psychologist of New Agers, says that belonging and love needs must be satisfied before esteem needs. And we know this, which is why we continue to get married, have children, and make friends. Despite the idea that you can *Be Your Own Best Friend*, as the title of a popular self-help book claims, we know it's better to have real friends and real relationships.

Research by Sandra Murray and her colleagues does show that people with low self-esteem appreciate their partners less and feel less secure in their relationships. If you truly don't like yourself, you may feel insecure about the other person's affection. Insecurity doesn't mean you don't love your partner, however, and this same research finds no evidence that lowself-esteem people choose bad partners. In addition, talk of loving yourself, making yourself happy first, and being there for yourself crosses the line from self-esteem into narcissism. And narcissists-people who really love themselves-are not very good at getting along with others. As Keith Campbell shows in his recent book When You Love a Man Who Loves Himself, narcissists are spectacularly bad relationship partners: they cheat, they are unsupportive, they play games, and they derogate their partners to make themselves look better. They also tend to lie, manipulate other people, and exert control and power. Campbell begins his book by relating a story told by one of his students, a woman who was dating a narcissistic man. One evening, they went to his fraternity's spring formal dance, where several awards were announced. To the woman's surprise, her boyfriend of a year won the prize for "the most hook-ups during Spring Break." Instead of looking ashamed, he looked proud and commented on how hot the girls were. When his girlfriend got upset, he blamed her for "ruining his formal." Clearly, a man who loved himself, but maybe not someone good at loving another.

Despite their self-aggrandizing tendencies, narcissists freely say that they are not as moral or as likable as other people. They think they are better than others at most things, but are also fully aware that they're not very good at relationships. And no, it's not because narcissists are actually insecure underneath—there's no evidence for that. They act this way because they put themselves first. As Campbell points out matter-offactly, "If I were to name the top 10 things that are important for a good relationship, loving yourself wouldn't make the list." When asked what traits they value in a partner, most people name things like kindness or consideration—in other words, loving and caring for other people, not yourself.

There's also the obvious danger of getting too accustomed to being on your own. If you learn to love yourself and your solitude, it will be a lot harder to adjust once you do find someone to share your life with. It's difficult to adapt to another person's needs when you're used to putting your own needs first and doing things your way. Many of the fights Gen Me'ers have with our partners can be traced back to this fundamental assumption that we are special. In her book Narcissism and Intimacy: Love and Marriage in an Age of Confusion, therapist Marion Solomon says that an increasing number of her patients have trouble in their relationships because they are too focused on themselves. "When the focus of life is on determining one's own needs and finding another who can fill those needs and wishes, any relationship is in danger of being flawed by narcissistic expectations," she writes. There is, she says, "an increasing demand for effective independent functioning without emotional reliance on others. The result is an inability to invest freely in deep feelings for others." If these trends continue—and it appears that they will—the divorce rate will probably remain high.

One young woman, interviewed in the book *Flux*, broke up with her boyfriend not because she was unhappy, but because she thought she might be happier with someone else. "I'm not inspired by you. Don't you think I deserve to be inspired?" she said to the hapless young man. Even if you haven't faced this kind of narcissism (and count yourself lucky if you haven't), we all face little tugs of war in our relationships on occasion: Should we go to his favorite restaurant or hers? Who does the dishes tonight? Who gets the rights to the TV? And who has to watch the children this evening?

This last question really brings the focus on the self crashing down to earth. In an analysis of data from 47,692 respondents, Keith Campbell, Craig Foster, and I found that childless married couples were, on average, more satisfied with their marriages than those with children. This effect has rapidly accelerated in recent decades. Compared to previous generations, Generation X and Generation Me experience a 42% greater drop in marital satisfaction after having children. Researchers at the National Marriage Project found similar results and concluded that "children seem to be a growing impediment for the happiness of marriages."

Although economic pressures may partially explain this change, it is likely rooted in the radical shift away from the self that parenthood requires. Having a baby suddenly means that you have little control over your life—the freedom to which you were accustomed vanishes, and your individual accomplishments are not as valued anymore. Parenthood has always been a difficult transition, but it's even more difficult for GenMe. When you're used to calling the shots, and then the baby dictates everything, it's hard to keep your sanity, much less get along with your spouse. The idea of individual choice also makes things more difficult; in previous generations, having children was a duty rather than a choice. Now that we "choose" parenthood, we presumably have no one to blame but ourselves when the baby has kept us up for two months in a row.

OUTCOMES OF THE FOCUS ON THE SELF

The appearance obsession

More and more people every year get nose jobs, breast implants, facelifts, and a long list of less invasive procedures like Botox injections and lip plumping. Eyebrow waxing has become a near requirement for women, and today's body-hugging fashions are enough to make women long for the big-shirt-and-leggings days of the early 1990s. With the rise of the metrosexual, more men are focusing on their own physical appearance as well. Many young men prize their workout-produced muscles and even resort to steroid use; in 2004, 8% of twelfth-grade boys admitted to using steroids.

We have come to equate looking good with feeling good, and to say that we should do whatever makes us feel good or makes us happy. Fox's controversial show *The Swan* justified the expensive, painful surgeries of its contestants by claiming that the women now felt better about themselves. MTV has a show called *I Want a Famous Face*, in which young people undergo plastic surgery so they can look like their favorite



An ad clearly aimed at Generation Me: the product is "unique," "individual," and "yours alone." Plus, it makes you look hot.

celebrity. Crystal, 23, underwent a breast enlargement and liposuction, ostensibly to resemble actress Brooke Burke. Immediately after the surgery, Crystal was in so much pain, she said, "I just want to die right now." A few months later, however, she's confident that her surgically enlarged breasts will help her reach her goal of becoming a bikini model. She says that the surgery "definitely built up my self-esteem." Her boyfriend, who thought she looked great before, says he's fine with it as long as "you're happy with yourself."

In October 2004, *People* magazine interviewed several celebrities about their views on plastic surgery. All of those who supported it said almost exactly the same thing. "If it makes you happy, if it makes you feel good, you should do whatever that is," said Julia Roberts. "Anything that makes you feel better, go for it," said Jennifer Aniston. But it was the youngest interviewee—Hilary Duff, then 17—who summed it up the best: "If it's going to boost their self-esteem and make them feel better about themselves, then I don't see a problem with it." This is pure GenMe: Do whatever it takes to feel better about yourself, because that's the most important thing in the world. More important, apparently, than keeping a scalpel off your face.

Tattoos, nose piercings, and God-knows-where piercings

Unless you've been in a cave for the past fifteen years, you've probably noticed that young people today are much more likely to adorn themselves in unconventional ways. Tattoos are no longer the sole province of bikers and sailors, but a trendy self-decoration employed by large numbers of young people, including the rich and famous. Young people pierce regions that older generations won't even mention in polite—or any conversation. Lips, tongues, belly buttons, and eyebrows are adorned with metal rings and studs. A recent exchange on a pregnancy message board addressed the best way to remove your belly button ring before your swelling abdomen made it pop out.

I didn't think piercings and tattoos had anything to do with psychological changes over the generations until Jay, 20, told me a story about his tattoos and his reasons for getting them. Jay went to his grandparents' house one day and took off his shirt before jumping in the pool. His grandmother, shocked to see his heavily tattooed upper back, gasped audibly and expressed her disappointment in him, since he'd always been "the good grandkid." Jay tried to enlighten his grandmother: "I explained to her that to me my tattoos are an expression of who I am and how I view myself. My tattoos show the different sides of who I am," he wrote. It turns out that Jay's motivations are representative. In a 1999 survey of 766 college students with tattoos or body piercings, the most common reason given for their choices was "self-expression." Eighty-one percent of tattooed college students named self-expression, independence, or uniqueness as a motivation. Sixty-nine percent of students with body piercings named self-expression or "to be different" as their reasons. Natasha, 25, has several tattoos and piercings, including several studs at the nape of her neck. During a class presentation on the topic, another student asked Natasha why people get unusual piercings when they so often elicit negative comments and appalled looks from other people. "They do it to express themselves and be different," Natasha said. "Most people who get piercings don't care what other people think. They do it to make themselves happy, and that's what's most important to them."

So tattoos and nose rings might not be just random fashion trends after all. Instead, they are a medium for self-expression and the communication of individuality. They fit the generational trend perfectly: they are outward expressions of the inner self. They allow you to be different and unique. It's so important to be an individual, and to communicate that fact to others, that young people routinely tattoo it onto their skin.

Extending adolescence beyond all previous limits

When Daniel finally finished college at 24, he wasn't sure what career to pursue. So he moved back in with his parents and stayed there, unemployed, for two and a half years. His brother John lived at home for three years while attending community college. After moving away to attend a four-year university, he finally earned his college degree at age 26. Six months later, he was back to living at home when he couldn't find a job. This postponement of adulthood is not limited to men, either: Tina, 26, plans to drive around the country in a van for several years after she finishes her Ph.D. She has no idea when, or if, she will "settle down."

Ask someone in GenMe when adulthood begins, and a surprising number will say 30. For this generation, your early twenties—and often your late twenties—are a time to move around, try different things, and date different people. "In the past, people got married and got a job and had kids, but now there's a new 10 years that people are using to try and found out what kind of life they want to lead," says Zach Braff, 29, the actor and screenwriter of the 2004 GenMe hit movie *Garden State*. The movie plays off these ideas: Braff's character works as a waiter in L.A. and is trying to break into acting. His friends back home in New Jersey live with their parents and work dead-end jobs, one quite literally as a gravedigger, and another as a knight-waiter, in full metal body armor, at the restaurant-cum-festival Medieval Times. The only guy with any money made it by inventing something ridiculous ("silent Velcro"), and spends his time getting laid, taking Ecstasy, and riding around his giant house on a four-wheeler.

GenMe marries later than any previous generation, at 27 for men and 25 for women (and in many European countries, it's 30 for men and 27 for women). In 1970, when the Boomers were young, these figures were 23 and 21—so much for Free Love. What's even more surprising are the number of young people who do not achieve financial independence; for example, the percentage of 26-year-olds living with their parents has almost doubled since 1970, from 11% to 20%. In 2002, 57% of men and 43% of women aged 22 to 31 lived with their parents. Young people are also taking longer to finish college: only 37% of students complete their degrees in four years. Even at prestigious schools like UCLA, less than half of students finish in the previously customary four years.

In a 2005 cover story on the phenomenon, *Time* magazine labeled these young people "Twixters"; others label this new area between adolescence and adulthood "youthhood" or "adultesence." Some of the forces behind these trends are economic, and I'll address those further in Chapter 4. But many young people interviewed in the article say that the reason they are postponing adult roles is, you guessed it, their desire to **put themselves first**. "I want to get married but not soon," said Jennie Jiang, 26. "I'm enjoying myself. There's a lot I want to do by myself still." Marcus Jones, 28, says he won't marry for a long time. "I'm too self-involved. I don't want to bring that into a relationship now," he admits. Maroon 5 singer Adam Levine, 25, echoed this in an *Us Weekly* profile: "I'm all about getting married in my thirties, but right now I'm enjoying my selfish twenties!"

The same motivations appear in career choices. Many young people don't want to commit to a career and stay with it because they'd like to find exactly the right job for them. Jeffrey Arnett, author of *Emerging Adulthood*, says: "They're not just looking for a job. They want something that's more like a calling, that's going to be an expression of their identity." Overall, it's the pursuit of individual wants at its most undiluted. As the Twixters article explains, young people are "making sure that when they do settle down, they do it the right way, *their* way." Their individual way.



Median Age at First Marriage, 1960-2003

Generation Me'ers marry considerably later than their Boomer counterparts did in the 1960s and 1970s.

Materialism

GenMe's brand of self-importance also shows up as materialism. In 1967, when the Boomers were in college, 45% of freshmen said it was important to be well-off financially. By 2004, 74% embraced this life goal. Another survey found that 1990s high school students were twice as likely as their 1970s counterparts to say that "having lots of money" was "very important." Olivia Smith, interviewed for the CBS Class of 2000 project, says, "I basically just want to grow up safe and luxurious and have lots of money."

Some of this is probably due to necessities like housing being more expensive—it takes more money to get by now. However, GenMe has always lived in a time when possessions were valued. Boomers were exposed to the nascent beginnings of marketing to children in the 1950s, but advertising aimed specifically at children has increased exponentially within the last few decades. If it's plastic and advertised on TV, kids want it. As Juliet Schor documents in her book *Born to Buy*, kids have much more spending power these days, and parents include them in many more consumer decisions. Advertising is common in many schools, and children can identify brands when they are 18 months old. College students are fully engrained into these attitudes—the new trend is designer dorm rooms with coordinated bedding and new couches. College kids spend \$2.6 billion a year on decorating their spaces, about \$1,200 each on average.

Materialism is the most obvious outcome of a straightforward, practical focus on the self: you want more things for yourself. You feel entitled to get the best in life: the best clothes, the best house, the best car. You're special; you deserve special things. Seventeen-year-old Jocelyn Bower's uncle, Kevin Arnett, bought her a \$8,275 Versace gown to wear to her high school prom. Arnett explains, "She's a very good girl, one of a kind, and she should have it." Next year, Jocelyn says, "We'll hopefully go back to Versace and get an even more expensive dress!" This might be unusually extravagant, but it's clear that the days of a \$100 dress and a dance in the gym are over. *Prom Guide* magazine says that the average high school couple spends \$800 for their prom night, up from \$300 per couple five years ago.

A Sears ad for girls' clothing ties it all together: "You gotta believe in your dreams. You gotta stand up for yourself. You gotta be there for your friends. But, hey, *first* you gotta have something to wear. You *gotta* have the *clothes*." And the clothes the model is wearing? The outfit costs \$267. This continues into adulthood as well. "I have a six-year-old house with four bedrooms, I have a nice big garage. I'm about to get a new car, and I already had one before the current one. I'm able to purchase what I like," says Marcus Groenig, 28, interviewed in *What Really Happened to the Class of '93*. "Physical possessions are a way to measure happiness," he concludes.

And it's not to "keep up with the Joneses" as it was in previous generations. The virtue of expensive things is comfort, enjoyment, and getting what you want. In the past, many people wanted a big house to impress people. GenMe wants a big house so each family member can have as much personal space as possible, consistent with the needs of the individual. Kids don't want to share rooms anymore, and parents like to have "retreats" off the master bedroom where they can relax away from the kids. Plus we need places to put all of the stuff we buy, like our computers and our game systems. And everyone wants to move out of the apartment where he can smell his neighbor's food and hear his neighbor's music. SUVs serve much the same purpose, building an impenetrable fortress around the individual even when driving to the grocery store. We also shun used things and hand-me-downs; in the pursuit of individualism, we want something made just for us that's shiny and new. "Why go on your honeymoon with the same old luggage?" asks an ad. (I dunno because your old luggage is just fine?) It's a long way from my father's and grandfather's favorite phrase, "Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without."

So many products now cater to the tastes of the individual. Instead of listening to the radio and hearing what everyone else does, we program our own special mix on our iPod, put in the headphones, and enter an individually created world. We even choose unique ring tones for our cell phones. Instead of three or four network stations, we can watch cable channels dedicated to our own interests. Instead of watching TV live with everyone else in our time zone, we TiVo it and watch it when we want to. "I want to do things that conform to my time frame, not someone else's," says UCLA senior Matthew Khalil on why he rarely goes to the movie theater anymore but instead watches DVDs at home.

Individualism has driven the increasingly large universe of consumer choice in other things as well. Within a few decades, cream and sugar became decaf skim cappuccino grande to go. The coffee choices at Starbucks amount to 19,000 combinations—what better way to feel like an individual? From clothing to cars to jewelry, consumer products are designed to exhibit the wants of the unique self. "Shopping, like everything else, has become a means of self-exploration and self-expression," writes David Brooks.

It's also taken for granted that everyone who is someone is rich, and that materialism is not only desirable but practically orgasmic in its pleasure. Almost half of the shows on MTV the last few years featured rich people and their lifestyles: Meet the Barkers, The Osbournes, Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica, Cribs, My Super Sweet 16. The last show is especially egregious, focusing on teenagers whose parents spend half a million dollars on 16th birthday parties. The trips to Vegas to shop, the New York dancers brought in for the party, and the thousands on the invitation list are all presented without comment, making these extravagances seem normal. There's certainly some parody intended in the way the rich kids whine, but this subtlety is likely to slide past the average 15-year-old watching the show. A show on the cable channel Home & Garden TV is actually called *I Want That!* It's described by *Life & Style Weekly* as a new series that "focuses on modern must-haves for the home. Tonight: a rain- and snow-resistant outdoor TV." Yep, a TV you can watch in the snow is definitely a must-have—particularly if your list of "musts" includes subjecting your neighbors to the noise from your indestructible television.

It reminds me of my first Halloween as a home owner, just a few years ago. Most of the trick-or-treaters were both very cute and polite, but then a boy who looked about 10 came to the door, dressed in an unidentifiable costume. I gave him two pieces of candy. He stood there with his bag open, looked at me, and said, "More."

This is where self-esteem crosses over into entitlement: the idea that we deserve more. And why shouldn't we? We've been told all of our lives that we are special.

So are there any upsides to the confidence and optimism of GenMe? Maybe—*if* this confidence is based in reality, and *if* it does not cross over into narcissism and entitlement. It is fine for children to be encouraged to try many different things and to be praised for doing well. It's also great that young people have been taught not to limit their career choices based on their sex or race; this was the original intent behind "you can be anything." Sooner or later, however, everyone has to face reality and evaluate his or her abilities. It is good for young people to believe that they can succeed, but only if they have the tools to do so. When based on real skills, the high aspirations of GenMe can propel young people into volunteer projects, college, and desirable jobs. Even then, however, bright young people may be disappointed that their jobs are not as fantastically fulfilling, high-paying, or fame-producing as they would have liked. Focusing on individual goals can be an asset, but only up to a point.

The individualistic ethos of America also explains a lot of negative trends that we see around us every day. A trip to the grocery store, as just

one example, often involves aggressive drivers, sullen clerks, and scream ing children. Then there's that ultimate modern annoyance: the peopl who talk loudly on their cell phones, oblivious to their effect on others GenMe didn't pioneer this trend—it's popular among middle-aged people as well—but young people are certainly continuing it. It's not the technology that causes the problem, but the attitude that comes with it an attitude that captures the trend toward self-importance better that almost anything else. "Years ago, cell phones were the province of the powerful, but now that they are mass-market items, everyone has delusions of grandeur," says Eric Cohen, editor of *The New Atlantis*. "Now there are 280 million masters of the universe in America."

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