Introduction

"You are the future." It seems like the right message. I've heard politicians give this speech to groups of high school students. I've heard it from distinguished men and women speaking to graduating college seniors. I've heard it from parents speaking to their teenagers. But my generation is not the future. We are the present, and we're already making a major impact. Think about the twenty-eight year old who created and runs the largest social network in the world, or the thirty-one year old who directs the White House office of speechwriting, or the high school students in Danbury, Connecticut, organizing their peers in an effort to end the genocidal crisis in Darfur, half a world away. From the streets of the Bronx to the streets of Tehran, from inside the West Wing to the tech labs of Palo Alto, from rural Ohio to the mountains of Nepal, the Millennials have seized hold of the world around them, decided to make a difference, and are doing it right now. What's more, they've been doing it for the last decade.

It took us a long time to get here. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the industrial revolution was accelerating. The prior century had given us the steam engine, railroads, powerful looms, interchangeable parts, and the cotton gin. These innovations paved the way for a political and cultural infrastructure that resembled the hierarchical factory system. But now the industrial revolution was moving into a new phase that would see quantum breakthroughs in technology—automobiles, airplanes, and the harnessing of electricity and light—and that would also bring about a radical set of democratizing political and cultural paradigm shifts. To a society accustomed to railroads and horses, the world seemed to be in a state of chaos. Government-sponsored compulsory education, women having the right to vote, and the progressive reforms that curbed abuses of monopoly power and child labor

and allowed workers to organize labor unions all seemed radical. Some businessmen didn't see how different the new era would be. Some refused to adapt. Some tried, and failed. When the winds began to shift, the business titans of an earlier era missed the flight to the new industries of the future. Younger upstart competitors emerged, confident in their ability to harness new discoveries as well as comfortable with the shifting social and political realities. When the dust of this new industrial revolution had settled, the visionaries of the early twentieth century emerged—people like Thomas Edison, who imagined a new world of electric power without worrying about its effect on railroads or carriage and buggy manufacturers, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who saw the opportunity to enact a century-defining New Deal. Their visions were so powerful that they still play a major role in shaping our world today.

The new breed of leaders was comfortable with change. They saw and embraced the new world that was fast approaching. They let go of their preconceptions and not only adapted, but succeeded. The accepted truths of the Anglo-American gilded Victorian age—about race, religion, and the limited role of government in the economy, among many other questions—eroded amid a new world order of technology, immigration, urbanization, consumerization, reform of capitalism's most outrageous disparities, and the first stages of demographic diversity.

Once every few generations, there is a revolution that shifts the fundamentals of our economy, society, culture, communications, and social relations in this kind of top-to-bottom way. We are living through a period like that today. The modern world has always been in a state of flux. Indeed, some significant frequency of change is definitional to modernity. But the impact of change has arguably never been as sweeping or disruptive as it is today. This is in part because the rate of change itself is exponentially greater than it has ever been. As a result, more transformation takes place in a single year than in some previous decades. New technologies are being adopted at an exponentially faster rate. Consider this: When the Palm Pilot was introduced in 1997, it took eighteen months to sell one million units—and was considered a stunningly transformational product as a result. Yet it took just twenty-four hours for the iPad to sell the same amount immediately after it debuted in 2010.

Political change is also happening more rapidly. Though many politicians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries spent years building their resumes and relationships so that they might one day be able to run for president, in 2004, a little-known state senator keynoted the Democratic National Convention and was sworn in as president five years later. In 2010, the Tea Party wiped out much of the Democrats' congressional power. Yet the Tea Party itself, seen as a sweeping game changer, crumbled only two years later. Similarly, the Occupy Wall Street movement gathered and reached massive visibility in late 2011, only to be swept away and virtually disappear in the first few months of 2012.

This is part of the new world order. This is the fast future. Change is fast and constant. In the fast future our culture, institutions, government, and citizens don't always have time to catch up with these tsunamis of reinvention, so they are often left dizzy, surprised, or angry. As these institutions and their leaders are trying to figure out the new world, one generation hasn't had much trouble adjusting: my generation, the Millennials.

Millennials are people born in the 1980s and 1990s (that is, people who came of age in some way around the turn of the millennium). There is considerable debate over how to count the Millennials. Some demographers and generational experts have measured as many as eighty million members of my generation, which would make Millennials the largest generation in American history, slightly larger than the boomers, who originally numbered seventy-six million. The eighty million figure for Millennials is derived by counting all those born between 1980 and 1999. This particular two-decade period of generally rising birth rates and a mini–baby boom (sometimes called the "echo boom" because Millennials were being born to Baby Boomer parents) provides a fair comparison to the two decades of the original Baby Boom, which many demographers cite as spanning the years 1946–1964. But if you leave the bulges in birth rates aside, there are more relevant social, economic, and cultural characteristics that define these generations more narrowly.

This book is focused on the Millennials who were born between 1980 and 1994, who are today between nineteen and thirty-three. In

addition to sharing the demographic characteristics of being the "echo boom," this group shares certain important generational experiences that shaped our childhood and young adult years. The Millennials born between 1980 and 1994 are old enough to have consciously experienced the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a major defining event of our generation. In addition, those born in this fifteen-year period share the characteristic of having had one foot in the pre-Internet, pre–cell phone, pre-Facebook world, while the other foot is in the new world, as changed and redefined by the proliferation of web, mobile, and social technologies. Even using my narrower definition, there are more American Millennials than Boomers living today, since the Boomer headcount has started to shrink, owing to the adverse impact of death rates, while the ranks of Millennials have increased in number, not to mention in diversity, with the growing population of Millennial immigrants. But no matter how you define us, we are one of the largest generations in history. What's more, as we settle into full-bodied adulthood, we are fast becoming the most influential demographic slice of the American pie, disproportionately driving economic indicators and social, cultural, and political trends. In many countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia Millennials make up over a third or even half the population. Worldwide, there are 1.7 billion Millennials—almost one-third of the people on earth.

So it is no surprise that in reality, and in our own perception, we are the most global generation. We can be in touch with our peers almost anywhere in the world with just one click. We are the most connected generation. We are also the most aware of our connectedness and global reach. Our formative years have taught us that resilience and adaptability are essential for survival. We saw the 9/11 attacks. Two wars have raged on for more than half of our lives. We saw the impeachment of a president and the escalation of the politics of personal destruction. We saw our peers kill each other in Columbine. We witnessed the devastating effects on our families, jobs, and homes of a dysfunctional financial system and mega-collapses of companies and national economies from Enron, Lehman Brothers, and Greece to our own American debt downgrade. All of these events took place at key moments in our psy-

chological and intellectual development. They shaped our view of the world, making us more focused on trying to solve the big challenges that lie at the core of our future.

In the 2008 financial crisis, while older Americans often reacted with frustration, embitterment, and despair, Millennials were learning about the uncertainty in our world and how to combat it. As the economic crisis got worse, Millennials actually became more optimistic about their own economic future, while every other demographic group became steadily more pessimistic. This is an interesting indicator, suggesting that our future economic and social success may mirror that of the Greatest Generation. Our grandparents, who were children and teenagers during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when despair ruled the land, ultimately leveraged their youthful energy and resourcefulness to become a highly civic-minded, self-sacrificing, and prosperous generation.

Our society runs on an unseen and usually undiscussed "operating system" that reflects the set of cultural knowledge and assumptions and other rules of the road that will lead to positive outcomes, successful lives, rising living standards, and general progress. Like a computer operating system, it gets regular updates. Some are small and routine. But some are bigger, requiring an upgrade to a new version. Today there is a brand new operating system running, and the Millennials are the primary authors of that system. Some authors of this code are visible and successful Millennial leaders. Others are ordinary young people whose social attitudes, user power, and influence even in small communities of friends and peers are helping to fill in millions of lines of necessary code, making it stronger and more able to withstand future attacks.

Unlike Boomers, members of Generation X, and others who have preceded us, we understand this new operating system intuitively. Unlike Generation Z and others who will succeed us, we have context. We understand the world before the fast future. We weren't born with iPhones in our hands. Many of us didn't have computers until our teenage years. We did our first research projects in physical libraries. These experiences allow us to understand how the old world worked and how to effectively solve problems in the new one. Because we are the ones

writing the code, we are also the ones who can most effectively tweak it. We're open source, so other developers may participate, but ultimately we're the ones best suited to make the biggest changes.

Millennials are far from the first generation to want to change the world. Under the specter of the Vietnam War and intense racism, the Boomers wanted to end war and achieve equality for all. They saw the political system as the enemy—an impossible partner. Some advocated for the overthrow of the entire system. Their goals were specific: enact civil rights legislation and end the war in Vietnam. When those incredible goals were accomplished, many of them moved on to other pursuits and professions.

But because Millennials have grown up in the fast future, we think of the world practically and pragmatically. We know it as constantly changing and changeable. The problems we face seem bigger and more global, and the solutions we envision are both longer-term and more structural—and yet at the same time, more urgent than ever. We know we'll be working on solutions to these problems for our whole lives—and we also know we need to start now.

Every group of people is influenced by and, in some sense, a product of their times. But the Millennials have come of age on the cusp of a once-in-a-century revolution. We have the potential to be the greatest agents of change for the next sixty years. Already, we've had an important impact on the world and done some impressive things. We've toppled dictators, helped elect a president, created social networks that have connected the world, forced businesses to adopt a social agenda broader than profit—and all before most of us have turned thirty.

Millennials may not be as radical as their Boomer forebears, and may never fight such clear-cut moral battles as those who lived through the civil rights movement, for example. But in the range of issues Millennials choose to tackle, in the huge power of our numbers augmented by technology and other tools, and in the unique combination of our passion and our pragmatism, we may actually prove to be as effective or even more effective change agents.

Some skeptics will say that the youth demographic is congenitally excited, easily engaged and mobilized, but that we ultimately fizzle out. Others think of us in the same way gen Xers came to be stereo-

typed—apathetic, bitter, and nihilistic. As an insider to the Millennial Generation, I've seen a tremendous amount of optimism and idealism, tempered by an appropriate if sometimes surprising amount of realism and pragmatism. Millennials have a passion for making a difference. But we also have a genuine interest in policy, process, and institution-building. The mix of these ingredients will help make our long-term optimism sustainable.

Millennials are not strangers to criticism—or, for that matter, to having our power and influence overlooked, ignored, or doubted. Pundits, prognosticators, and politicians dismissed the importance of young people before the 2008 election. The youth vote was all "talk," they said. But, defying these predictions, the 2008 election saw one of the highest turnouts of young voters in history, and almost all studies show that it was the youth vote in key states that created the margin of victory for Obama over McCain.

History is full of the achievements of amazing young people. Thomas Jefferson was thirty-three when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. Mozart composed his first concerto at age five. Bill Gates founded Microsoft at nineteen, Steve Jobs built his first Apple computer prototype at twenty-one. From rock music to sports, young, talented stars have defined those cultural worlds for the last half-century. Today, however, there is a new level of ease with which even "ordinary" young people—who are "merely" smart, passionate, and engaged with the world around them, not necessarily prodigies—can become standouts in our society doing amazing things.

In previous eras, young people haven't had the resources or tools to bring their ideas and vision into the world instantaneously. But as inhabitants of an increasingly digital world, we need very few physical tools or resources to make an impact. With just a few clicks or keystrokes, even the least powerful among us can instantly reach at least thousands of people all over the world.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the not-for-profit field, where Millennials have become key players. More young people than ever are starting their own not-for-profits and organizations, in fields from chronic disease research to climate change. I saw this firsthand in June of 2009, when I was given an award by DoSomething.org, the

country's largest organization dedicated to supporting young people taking social action. My first introduction to DoSomething.org came a year earlier when I attended one of their not-for-profit "boot camps," which they host across the country. When I arrived early on a Sunday morning, I found myself in a room with about a hundred of my peers, all under twenty-five. Each person ran their own organizations focused on a wide range of issues, from promoting understanding of autism to aiding homeless youth and everything in between. I looked around and thought: we're not geniuses; we're just young people with an idea and a passion to make it happen. We worked hard and had to be good at recruiting others from outside our generation to help us. Many of us had strong leadership and organizational skills. But we were all regular people who used the tools and resources at our disposal to build extraordinary organizations and social movements. Today, Millennials are so frequently active in forming new organizations and initiatives to address causes and issues that the fast-growing sector known as social entrepreneurship has become synonymous with the Millennial Generation.

Generations are tricky to write about, perhaps especially when you're young and writing about your own. In 1972, a young Joyce Maynard (who would later gain a measure of fame as the lover of J. D. Salinger, and still later as a novelist) observed, "Every generation thinks it's special—my grandparents because they remember horses and buggies, my parents because of the Depression. The over-thirties are special because they knew the Red Scare of Korea, Chuck Berry and beatniks. My older sister is special because she belonged to the first generation of teen-agers (before that, people in their teens were adolescents), when being a teen-ager was still fun. And I—I am 18, caught in the middle. Mine is the generation of unfulfilled expectations."[1]

Indeed, every generation does think it is special. As a Millennial, I undoubtedly see special characteristics in my generation that others don't recognize—or at least don't recognize yet. The long-term impact and view of generational experiences changes with time. The Boomers, seen as so focused on social and political change in the 1960s, are now viewed through the prism of the "Me Generation" label that was affixed to them in the mid-1970s by Tom Wolfe. And don't forget: the

same people we know and respect today as the Greatest Generation were seen in the 1970s as the Silent Generation, who survived the Great Depression and World War II and fought the Korean War, but drank and smoked their way through the postwar world, doing little to oppose racism, sexism, and injustice at home.

This book is by no means an account of every single Millennial. Nor do I intend to paint a picture of my generation as perfect. Some of us are excessively materialistic, some of us are part of the "everyone-gets-a-trophy" mentality, some of us feel entitled, some are overly focused on celebrity culture, and some of us are apathetic and angry. These flaws have been pointed out by a number of critics and have become part of the popular understanding of the Millennial Generation. In this book I have identified a number of the transformative ideas and trends that are not just nascent, but quite prevalent among the Millennials—and what those ideas and trends may mean as they play out over the next several decades. There are exciting and promising movements afoot in this generation, and there are others that may generate cause for concern. It is important to understand both the positive and the negative in the proper context of their power and reach.

I've spent the past six years criss-crossing the country, having conversations with hundreds of Millennials doing amazing things but also with intellectual leaders, politicians, actors, journalists, business leaders, and everyday people at all ages and stages of life, all of whom are trying to make sense of living in the fast future. If you want to get one of the best glimpses possible into what the future has in store for us, follow me on this tour of what the Millennials are already accomplishing. I think you will be inspired to see that the future is bright and that we are uniquely qualified to rise to the challenges it poses.

Historically, young people have been pioneers of "The Next Big Thing." They've led movements and developed attitudes that anticipated where the rest of society would go before the general population caught up. Young people are often the first to see big changes in our world and often the first to figure out how to respond. So there's good reason to pay close attention to how this generation is thinking.

But don't take it only from me. In 1813, as America was coming into its own, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "The new circumstances under which

we are placed call for new words, new phrases, and for the transfer of old words to new objects."[2] Quoting Jefferson in a 1962 commencement speech at Yale University, President John F. Kennedy said, "New words, new phrases, the transfer of old words to new objects—that is truer today than it was in the time of Jefferson, because the role of this country is so vastly more significant. . . . You are part of the world and you must participate in these days of our years in the solution of the problems that pour upon us, requiring the most sophisticated and technical judgment; and as we work in consonance to meet the authentic problems of our times, we will generate a vision and an energy which will demonstrate anew to the world the superior vitality and strength of the free society."[3] What was true in Jefferson's time, and truer in Kennedy's time, is even truer today. We always have and always will need to adapt, create new words, and solve new problems. In the fast future world, the Millennials will need to do much of this work.