**Generation X’s journey from jaded to sated**

**Boomers cry "More, more, more!" and Millennials whine “Me, me, me!” But Gen Xers know when to say "Meh"**

[Whitney Collins](http://www.salon.com/writer/whitney_collins/), The Weeklings

[Enlarge](http://media.salon.com/2013/10/reality1.jpg)IF YOU CAN remember what life was like before R.E.M.—and can identify a Care Bear but sure as hell never went to bed with one—consider yourself an inducted member of Generation X. Our generation is one that’s always been defined by the best and worst of culture, with MTV, *Star Trek*, and the Apple II on one end of the spectrum and rampant divorce, nukes, and AIDS on the other. As kids, we were left to play independently while marriages crumbled in the background. As teens, we were unimpressed by, but close friends with, the REAL real world. And now as grown-ups, most of us have broken through the other side of angst, like Dee Snider through a dining room door, and are, simply and deservedly, downright content.

There’s always speculation about why certain generations are happier than others. And while it might have something to do with the lack of boy bands in your particular age range, how contentment came to pass for those born roughly between 1962 and 1977 is no accident. It’s the reward for hard-working indifference. It’s what happens when resentment turns into resilience and you step out into adulthood with no one really watching. And it’s a nice landing spot, this hammock of “good enough” that’s sandwiched between the Boomers’ “More, more, more!” and the Millennials’ “Me, me, me!”

(Perhaps you could think of our rally cry as “Meh, meh, meh.”)

Generation Xers have always suspected, and now know for sure, that there’s only so much you can expect out of life before you fall prey to chronic dissatisfaction. Not to mention, when you’ve grown up knowing there’s a big red button that can be pushed to end the world (and all of your toys were choking hazards), you tend approach things with equal parts bitterness and ballsiness. The love child of which is blitheness.

So. How did Gen X end up so Zen? Allow me to paint in broad strokes and offer up these five theories:

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**1. We *Like* Work**

I got my first job at 16, running errands in a 1978 Wagoneer that had a rusted hole in its floor and required pliers to operate the windshield wipers. My employer was a tiny graphic arts and advertising firm, in the days when things were still done with X-Acto knives and Liquid Paper, and when I wasn’t running across town for tacos to feed the fresh-from-college designers, I spent most of my day either cleaning the toilets or in a darkroom developing PMTs (the equivalent today of a daguerreotype).

I liked my job, *a lot*, particularly working alongside employees that I now realize were the first Gen Xers. But I didn’t like my job because of *what* I was doing, rather *how*I got to go about doing it. I’d grown up watching my parents’ generation punch the clock, and—rich or poor, surgeon or salesman—they all seemed dour about their predicaments. There was a certain paper-pushing, nose-to-the-grindstone mentality about it all, likely because they worked under the shadow of 1980s fortune.

But this job was different from any I’d seen before. We wore jeans. We piped in Hall & Oates. We told a lot of jokes while cranking out a lot of assignments. The designers weren’t aggrieved by the concept of labor. Rather, they wore sneakers and Walkmans, they drove crappy little Hondas that rattled with old cans of Tab, and they all talked of things—were *defined*by things—other than the work before them. Music and friends, hiking and television, babies and dogs and tacos. I remember thinking: now this is what work should be like: something you don’t loathe or love, but like well enough.

Gen X had witnessed what its parents had done in the name of Mercedes or making ends meet (depending on economic class), and we pledged to set our sights on careers that we weren’t beholden to. We wanted jobs that helped us to live but weren’t life itself.

Today, in the same way the Boomers were driven by fortune, the Ys seem awfully enamored of fame. And who can blame them? They grew up with both the Oprah mantra of “finding your passion” and more child stars than you could shake a pageant baton at. For them, *The Hills* are very much alive, and if they can’t be famous, they’d at least like a dream job.

We Gen X kids didn’t have this sort of temptation. We fantasized about becoming Flash Gordon or Pat Benatar, but adults told us, and rightfully so, that our fantasies were nothing more than pipe dreams. Thus, we never clamored for a spot on a Nickelodeon show; we just hung our posters of Bo Derek and Larry Bird and wished them well in their alternate realities. Then we put on our pirate hats, got in our Buick LeSabres, and headed to work at All-American Burger.

So now, here we Gen Xers are, more or less in our 40s, with neither fame nor fortune, just the freedom that comes with *what we do*being quite different from *who we are*.

“Hey, Joe. How’s work?”

“Doesn’t suck.”

“That’s great.”

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**2. We Can Warm a Bench**

I never got a medal or a letter in sports. Why? I didn’t deserve one. If you go find the basketball and soccer benches from my youth, they are still as warm as toast and as worn as Colosseum marble from my expendable ass. I was always good enough to make the teams I tried out for, but only good enough to be put IN the game if someone got decapitated.

I recall one fifth-grade basketball game where the clock stopped with three seconds remaining. I had yet to go in, but Coach saw his chance. “Martin!” he yelled, motioning to the court. I threw off my sweats, ran beneath the basket, listened to the buzzer blare before the opposing team could even complete a single pass, and *voila*: GAME OVER. I think I logged 14 seconds that season. Which is actually pretty good considering no one was beheaded.

Back when I was young, an athletic season either ended abruptly, without fanfare, or the Phys Ed staff threw some crappy banquet with paper bowls and food service-chili where the superior athletes got a lousy plaque. We had one of these banquets once for my seventh grade soccer team. I think it was the first time all season the parents actually showed up. I recall hearing a bunch of dads snort: “My kid played soccer?” And then they all laughed and stayed inside to smoke.

If you tell this story to a Millennial, they think it’s sad. “But my dad came to EVERY game,” they gasp. “AND every practice. AND he brought his zoom lens.” If you tell this to a Generation Xer, they stare and say: “You had a dad?”

(I don’t know what happens if you tell this to a Boomer. Probably: “Ahh, yes. Smoking.”)

My son currently has a Nintendo 3DS. This little machine spews out more verbal encouragement and gold redemption coins and psychological incentive in 30 minutes than my generation heard in 15 years. Sports of the 70s and early 80s were just like the arcade games of the same era. You got a couple of chances at an event that was unforgiving and hard to master. And if you lost, you lost. GAME OVER. Now move out of the way, there’s a pedophile with a roll of quarters who’s been waiting to play.

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**3. We Age Gracefully**

If you drive through a college campus these days, you’re not going to find a single female who’s wearing Doc Martens or engulfed by a prairie dress or schlepping along in a pair of men’s Umbros. Instead, you’re going to see a bunch of *very* pretty young women, in various stages of undress, who may have been given a breast enlargement, *from Daddy no less*, as a high school graduation present.

Something similar holds true for the Boomer women; once free-loving hippies or poodle-skirt sweethearts, these 60-something women are now permanent passengers on the Botox train. Pumped up with collagen and fillers, this wrinkle-free group of gals has rendered themselves almost fully recyclable in the PET bin.

“Pardon me. Is that a hot dog under your nose?”

“No, that’s my upper lip.”

Gen X is shyer about bodily renovation. We grew up looking at Molly Ringwald and Melissa Gilbert and Nancy McKeon—girls who were considered pretty or passable, even with big teeth and bad bangs and freckles. Not to mention, when we were little, there was no such thing as “playing dress-up”—unless you count putting on your mothers’ high heels and smoking a drinking straw and speculating on the Kennedy curse.

We came of age back when very little could be done if you were born unattractive. Hair extensions and tooth whitening and nose jobs were reserved for Elizabeth Taylor’s inner circle, so we all just slumped along in our glasses and retainers and Jordache jeans that went all the way up to our flat chests and accepted the fact that we’d probably have to work overtime on our personalities and putting out.

This has resulted in a whole mess of females who had to live through decades of bad hair days and unmedicated acne. With faces like ours, we relied more on our brains than our beauty to get us places. We’re a little more natural, a little more real, a little more down-to-earth. Bookended by those who love plastic and those who love princesses, here we are, in our ponytails, wary of the very un-Zen idea of perfection.

(I realize this particular theory is likely to piss off Boomers and Ys alike. *Don’t you realize you’re generalizing? Don’t you think women should support other women’s beauty choices? Are you jealous? Because I bet you slump around town in an Old Navy Zeppelin t-shirt and a pair of busted Tom’s and haven’t even brushed your hair today.*To which I answer: Yes. Yes. Yes. And why are you following me?)

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**4. We Played Catch With Friends Instead of Fathers**

Gen X guys aren’t much like their dads. They make dinner, they show up at school conferences, they march in PRIDE parades, they empty dishwashers, they take their daughters shopping for tampons, they have even been known to have Pinterest accounts and pin things to them (porn probably, but hey, it’s a start). A lot of them work from home or stay at home (also known as working), and, all in all, they’re a great bunch of fellows who have learned to pitch in, help out, and process complex emotions.

Some might say this is due to growing up with fathers who spent more time at the office than in the backyard. Some might say it’s from growing up with overburdened, multitasking moms. Some might credit their ponytailed peers with both encouraging and challenging them. But I’m giving the credit here to *Star Wars*.

This generation of guys grew up watching Luke Skywalker battle his father Darth Vader— the quintessential shitty dad—and triumph. In many ways, it’s the father-son story long told in literature and film, but in this particular instance, the son is incredibly relatable because he’s incredibly regular. Luke is just a short kid with a regrettable haircut and self-doubt in spades who is able to take a stand, change his destiny, and ultimately do away with the illusion that real men are, at best, detached, and, at worst, domineering dicks. Luke’s real triumph comes not with the Rebel victory, but in surrendering to the fact that his father will never be what he wanted him to be (except maybe in the five minutes before he dies).

This generation of guys watched that happen over and over again on film. In my opinion, it gave Gen X males permission to rebel against, reject, and redefine traditional manhood. And it explains why they’re okay letting go of what could have been and instead becoming the kind of guy they wished their dad had been—whether that be a mellow father, a devoted partner, or a fearless drag queen. Or, in some instances, all three.

(“That’s not true!” you may retort. “My dad wasn’t preoccupied! He was always there for me, on bended knee!” Well, congratulations, Robin Thicke. I’m obviously not talking to you.)

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**5. We Accept Impermanence**

Is “hapathy” this a word? I don’t know. I just think the overarching theme for Gen Xers is one of happy apathy. The whole Buddhist approach to living teaches non-attachment, in that “attachment is the origin, the root of suffering; hence it is the cause of suffering.”

Well, Generation X sure got its Zen on by watching marriages dissolve, the Berlin Wall fall, the stock market crash, a president get shot, the Space Shuttle explode, and Fonzie jump the shark. We grew up accepting that nothing was permanent—not the economy, not the Metric Conversion Act of 1975, not even the lead singer for Van Halen. To top it all off, all of our music has been ripped apart and remixed. All of our movies remade. Even Twinkies had to be resuscitated and I hear they taste different now. Because of this, we’ve learned not to get too attached. And because of this, we’re content.

Does that mean we’re above reproach? Of course not. We Xers can be aloof and arrogant. We tend to name our dogs after people (“Meet my pug: Zachary Jones.”) and our kids after dogs (“This is my oldest: Howl.”). We get misty over the smell of Aqua Net. And if acid wash jeans come back, we’ll be the first to have them on, no matter our age, particularly if they are ripped at the knee to reveal thermal underwear.

But all of us aged 36-ish to 51-ish should be pretty proud of learning how to “let go and let life.” It’s been a hard-fought battle, and we’ve got the untouched scars to prove it. We don’t need an award—we’ve never even owned a trophy case—so please hold your applause. We’ll just celebrate it quietly, right here, in our hammock of “just fine”, murmuring our “Meh, meh, mehs” while we DVR another generation’s biting reality.

http://www.salon.com/2013/10/01/how\_generation\_x\_went\_from\_jaded\_to\_sated\_partner/