



Boomers on the Edge

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Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hargrave, Terry D.

Boomers on the edge : three realities that will change your life forever /

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p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-310-27659-3 (softcover)

1. Baby boom generation—Religious life. 2. Intergenerational relations—
Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4579.5H365 2007

248.8'5—dc22

2007049132

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Interior design by Beth Shagene

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction: From the Corner to the Edge</i>	9
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PART 1

THE CHALLENGE OF CAREGIVING

1. Did You Say “Caregiving”?	37
2. The Big Three Transitions: House, Money, and Car	67
3. The Three “Ds”: Depression, Dementia, and Death	97

PART 2

THE CHALLENGE OF ADULT CHILDREN

4. What Happened to My Empty Nest?	127
5. Creating a Parenting Plan for Exit	155
6. Being a Parent and Grandparent at the Same Time	179

PART 3

THE CHALLENGE OF RETIREMENT

7. We Can’t All Be Wal-Mart Greeters	203
8. Making the Finances Work	231
9. Boomers Going Out with a Bang	249



INTRODUCTION: FROM THE CORNER TO THE EDGE

We are a generation that feels things deeply. Just think of how many thousands of us marched on high school, college, and university campuses, protesting for civil rights or against the war in Vietnam.

We are a generation unafraid of new things. Whether it is the innovative music of the Beatles revamping rock and roll or the embracing of computerization to the point where a digital world becomes a way of life, we move and change whenever things look exciting or promising.

We are a generation that is committed. Very few generations have made the effort to understand, nurture, and provide as many opportunities for their children as we have. We try to ensure that our offspring have healthy self-esteem and therefore every chance to succeed.

We feel things deeply; we are unafraid of challenges; we are committed. Our generation, the “baby boomers,” has remade society by our sheer numbers, new attitudes, and distinctive

behavior. But even with all our unique attributes – and as much as we have changed society – no one has ever called us “the Greatest Generation.”

To the generation that experienced the hardship of the Great Depression in the 1930s, the horror of World War II in the '40s, and the fear and paranoia of the Cold War in the '50s, we have often appeared selfish, self-absorbed, and irresponsible. It has seemed to them (and perhaps to much of the world and maybe even to ourselves) that we have never had our character tested in the crucible. It has almost been as though our experiences in reshaping attitudes toward civil rights and government, embracing the hard realities of computerization and the changes it has prompted in the world of employment, and facing the challenges of educating our children in an often dangerous atmosphere have not mattered in the eyes of the previous generation.

Perhaps no one has much noticed, but the boomer generation has demonstrated great commitment, resiliency, and grit in the past fifty years, all while remaining reasonably well connected emotionally. Maybe it is little noticed, but the boomers have what is commonly referred to as “heart.”

And it is a good thing that we have heart! Frankly, we are going to need it.

Here we are, in our fifties and sixties, perhaps thinking we were just about finished with making an impact on the world – when God taps us lightly on the shoulder, as if to say, “Ah, but there is one more thing.”

God has chosen *us* to embark on the greatest sociological change of this century, the most profound since we changed the face of history when we burst onto the world scene in the years following World War II. Yes, we are the generation of the baby boomers, and just as we changed education, social mores, and the American Dream in the last century, so we will change how life and family are “done” in this one. If previous generations

have doubted our grit to stand in the crucible, we are getting ready to be tested as we face three decades that promise to be every bit as challenging as the eras of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War.

God has used generations in the past to make their marks and fight through economic depressions, win wars, evangelize remote parts of the world, set up governments, and abolish slavery. With everything that we boomers already have changed, it will be our task yet again to make our mark and once more change the world. This comes at a time when we may have thought we would be slowing down—but the reality is that we are on the very edge of a totally different way of living.

So here they are—the three simple realities that will change our lives and the lives of our children forever:

- caring for aging parents
- raising an adult child who has moved back home
- retiring from a career, only to find that we must return to work

These three sociological factors—which, by the way, God has been molding and shaping for the past half century through medicine, economics, and lifestyle—will thrust us boomers right back into the vortex of change. These factors have been at work for many years and are now backing us into the corner. Many of us have seen these things edging in on us, but the thought of dealing with so many unknowns has felt overwhelming, given the press of so many current responsibilities. To preserve our sanity, we have tried to ignore these realities and just “not think about it.” But the reality of parents who are aging, adult children who are moving back home, and our own lack of financial means to retire and maintain our lifestyle for possibly twenty to thirty remaining years, has not relented.

With the advent of a new century, we are no longer cornered,

but we have been forced to open the window and perch ourselves on the precarious edge of acknowledgment. No matter how hard the task or difficult the adjustment, the pressure of living on this edge has forced us to look these factors straight in the eye and take responsibility for the changes and challenges that now face our families.

Will others question whether we are up to this task? Perhaps. But I do not. I believe that we boomers are poised to make the dramatic sacrifices necessary and adjust to new responsibilities that will rightly place *us* as one of the great generations, worthy of song and story. We are set to become the first Caregiving Generation. I believe we have been commissioned for this task. It is our time! So let's look at the facts of what we face.

REALITY 1: **Caring for Aging Parents**

Bob and Sue are great people who have great plans for their retirement. Bob worked as a mechanical engineer, and Sue taught in the public schools after staying home for the first few years with their two children. Now, with both children married and three young grandchildren, Bob and Sue felt they had arrived at the edge of recreational travel, planning long stays with their children who lived in different states and being able to have a large and positive effect on their grandchildren. They had reached the age of sixty-two with plenty of retirement resources, and nothing seemed surer than the life they had plotted out. It all seemed as reliable as one of Bob's mechanical drawings.

That is, until the last year. In those few months, the direction of Bob and Sue's retirement life shifted significantly. Sue's parents, ages eighty-four and eighty-five, were the first to show problems. Her mother fell and broke her hip, and after the surgery and a short convalescence at a nursing facility, Sue convinced herself that her mother could return home, with some

help and care from her father. But it quickly became clear that Sue's father hadn't been doing well for some time. It wasn't that he wasn't willing to care for his wife. He was! But his memory, energy level, and dexterity had been waning for many years – without Sue noticing. The truth? Sue's mother had been giving increasingly substantial care to her father for a long time, and he simply lacked the capability to care for her. With Sue's mother in need of significant care, Sue found, to her surprise, that she had *two* parents who needed two to three hours of her time each day to get their meals, get to doctor appointments, and make sure they took their medications.

But that wasn't the end of the story. Bob's father had died when Bob was in his early fifties. Since then, Bob's mother had always functioned well on her own, with minimal help from Bob and Sue – primarily just a bit of help managing some long-term finances. But within the last year, Bob started receiving overdue notices on bills from the electric and telephone companies. When Bob arranged to have his mother's bills paid directly out of the account, he thought he had solved the problem – until he received a call from the bank, informing him that his mother's account was overdrawn. And it was not overdrawn by a little, but by \$1,500!

Although his mother could not remember the incident, Bob discovered that she had written a check for several thousand dollars to a scam artist who guaranteed a miraculous return on her money.

Unfortunately, the problems were not confined to erratic financial behavior. Bob's mother also started calling him at strange hours during the night, asking him questions about where things were located in her house. She frequently lost items such as her car keys and purse. And he soon began to notice the small things that indicated she wasn't taking care of herself like she always had. Her hair often seemed a little askew,

DID YOU SAY “CAREGIVING”?

Let me be clear: aging is not optional. Most of us think, “Yeah, I know I’m getting older, and I’m beginning to feel all the creaks and aches that signal the reality that my body is changing and falling apart, a little at a time.” While true, this isn’t exactly what I mean.

When I say the word *aging*, I mean the time of life when disease or wear takes a toll on the body big enough to significantly diminish or remove entirely a person’s ability to function independently. Certainly, all of us are getting older, but not all of us are counted among the aging population.

Our chronological age is no longer a predictable marker of when we will hit this aging category. It certainly is not when we receive our AARP cards. It is doubtful it will be when we reach the traditional retirement age of sixty-five. And most likely it will not even be once we reach our seventies, when most of us will still be performing activities that look very much like middle age.

THE CHALLENGE OF CAREGIVING

You see, when I say *aging*, I really mean the group that some may call the “old, old.” This group of people can no longer hold on to their lives without some significant help from outsiders. Aging means giving up on the pretense that life will go on forever and accepting that death may be right around the corner. Aging means that health, wealth, and even relationships start to slip from one’s grasp, like a ship sailing away that grows smaller and dimmer and eventually disappears over the horizon.

This is the group that is revolutionizing aging as we know it. All of us boomers will eventually reach this “aging” category, but for the time being, we are simply getting older in our “middle age.” It is our parents who are now slipping into this “aging” group, and many are no longer able to manage everyday activities by themselves.

If you are not currently caring for an aging parent or in-law, chances are that you have started seeing some telltale signs that the decline of aging is at hand. As we have seen, medical science can keep people alive for many years, even when they have severe chronic health problems such as heart disease and emphysema. So with the advancement of medical science, not only do people live longer and healthier than at any other time in history; they also live longer and *unhealthier* than at any time in history.

For most, aging will mean a slow decline to eventual death. More and more help will be required with financial, emotional, and physical issues. I do not mean to refer to aging as some sort of macabre “death march,” because this process can bring some of the sweetest and most meaningful connections one can experience, where wisdom, courage, and strength become most evident. But aging is a time of decline, a long pathway to an eventual passing out of this life into the next. And with that decline comes the inevitable need for assistance and caregiving.

And who will do this caregiving? Those of us who are in the boomer age group, of course. More than 90 percent of the care

given to elders is provided by their families. Some elders need twenty-four-hour care and have medical problems that demand a nursing or care facility, but only about 5 to 8 percent of the aging population occupies one of these institutional facilities at any one time. And even if the elder is at a care facility, the caregiving responsibility remains, with families providing financial support and management, regular emotional connection, and, most of the time, augmenting the physical care provided by the institution.

The whole process of dealing with the decline of our elders—modifying their home environment, getting them to the proper medical treatment, managing and anticipating their care needs, and negotiating the switch of power and control of finances and decision making—is all part of the caregiving process, which, as mentioned earlier, can last a decade or more. Again, who will do this caregiving? It has been and will continue to be the boomer generation—and it is the first reality that will change the lives of boomers forever.

The Worthy Woman Named Genevieve

Several years ago, my wife and I began the process of caring for my mother-in-law, Genevieve. Genevieve was remarkable in so many ways. She had married an advertising executive from southern California when she was twenty-one, and she gave birth to four children in the next ten years. Her husband, Bill, was a “bigger than life” character with boundless energy and creativity. They ran with a beautiful crowd in Hollywood and had what many would consider “the good life.”

But Bill suffered from bipolar disorder and struggled mightily with severe bouts of depression throughout his life. During one such depressive episode, he made the tragic decision to take his own life.

THE CHALLENGE OF CAREGIVING

With four children, Genevieve made the courageous decision to move her family to Texas, where one of her brothers lived. Somehow she managed to pull her life back together. She galvanized herself against her own pain and set about getting her children in school and making a new life.

But a year later, tragedy struck once again when her oldest son, Bruce, became ill and suddenly died from acute leukemia. Surely she felt stunned beyond measure to lose both a husband and son within such a short period, but she kept moving and faithfully poured herself into her two remaining sons and her only daughter.

What seems most remarkable to me is that my wife remembers her growing-up years as characterized by happiness and filled with laughter. She recalls two tennis-playing big brothers and a loving mother who worked to create a healthy and nurturing household. Somehow, this worthy woman named Genevieve was able to overcome her personal pain to shore up the lives of her children and give them a happy home.

But her tragic story was not over. When her oldest remaining son was a senior in college, he and his date did not return from an evening out one Saturday night. A search the next day revealed that they had fallen victim to a brutal murderer who had locked their bodies in the trunk of her son's car.

Many people lose half of their family members to tragedy, but very few lose them at different times in such painful ways. When Genevieve found her family of six reduced to three, how did she survive? She focused on what was ahead and not on what was behind. She raised her two remaining children to adulthood; saw both of them graduate from college and earn advanced degrees; rejoiced as they found love and married; beamed as they fathered and mothered her grandchildren. Together, the family of three grew into close relationships with one another, deep and resourceful relationships with God, and

Did You Say "Caregiving"?

generative relationships with spouses and offspring. In many ways, it wasn't just a matter of surviving the tragedy; hurts were actually healed.

But everything wasn't perfect. Genevieve always had a secret coping mechanism that, while understandable, peppered the decades with some unhappy and unfortunate times. When she was in pain or experiencing terrible loneliness, she would drink. Occasionally at first, but as her isolation and loneliness grew with age, she began to drink more and more.

Then came one final blow. Twenty years after the murder of her son, a suspect was brought to trial. Although no new evidence had been uncovered, and old evidence had been destroyed, an overzealous district attorney and a police department desiring to clear its name brought the case to trial. It was as if the family had been thrown back into an ancient foxhole in a battle that it had thought was long over. But once again, the family had to face all the gruesome details, painful reminders, and harsh realities of how some deranged killer had cut short the life of a vivacious and loving son. After months of revisiting awful details and experiencing a useless trial that ended in a "not guilty" verdict, Genevieve and her family had been victimized by the tragedy all over again. This time, however, it seemed too much for this remarkable woman, and she began to slip into the oblivion of her alcoholism and isolation.

At the time, I had a great job as an assistant professor at a university where I loved to teach. But my wife and I saw firsthand how the emotional pain of the trial, followed by the uncontrolled alcoholism, was making Genevieve's life disappear. We made the decision to move back to Texas to look after Genevieve. I took a job at a fine community college, but I never found the job as fulfilling as my former teaching responsibilities or my research projects. Still, I reasoned that we were going to

THE CHALLENGE OF CAREGIVING

help Genevieve over the rough spots in this time of trouble, and then God would send us on our way to another university.

But we soon discovered the breadth of Genevieve's isolation that fed her anxiety, which led her to drink more – finally triggering the big “A”: Alzheimer's disease. In her illness, Genevieve resisted our efforts to help her and slid more and more toward the icy place of frozen thoughts, disappearing memory, and the despair of dementia. This prompted desperation of our own as we tried to care for a woman who would not accept care and as I dealt with a position where I felt increasingly unfulfilled and unhappy.

I had been willing to accept my new job when I believed that Genevieve would respond gratefully to our care and I would soon move on with my promising career. But when it became clear that Genevieve was not going to get stable, let alone better, and that moving to a community college had essentially cut off my university-level career, I really began questioning what God was doing. I began to resent God for sticking me in a place where I saw no way of escape and little challenge or good that I was accomplishing. Genevieve slid into the long and slow dying process of Alzheimer's, while I remained stuck in a job I disliked in a place I hated. Certainly, many things in my life were good. My wife and I related well, and my children prospered. But the constant drain of feeling stuck was enough to push me over into the abyss of depression.

Maybe not all boomer caregivers land in depression while marching through the course of caregiving, but many of us land where I did, when I wondered just what God was doing in my life. For the most part, we expect that our lives will move forward in productive ways, resulting in our happiness. But the job of caregiving challenges that notion to the very core.

As boomers, we have plans for our lives: seeing our kids grow up and have kids of their own, and seeing our lineage

Did You Say “Caregiving”?

grow; achieving financial security and occupational stability; finally slowing down and reaping some of the harvest of the long years of work and raising our families. All of these things seem to be the “self-evident” plan of God.

But caregiving is like a wrench thrown into the mechanics of this perfect plan. We begin to see that the involvement and care we thought we would be giving to grandchildren is being spent instead in caregiving to Mom or Dad. We lurch into the reality that we may have to work for many more years in order to provide for the financial needs that Mom or Dad cannot cover. We may realize that the priority we once gave to our work is compromised as we have to spend more time caregiving—a reality that may result in less and less job security. And we get hit hard with the prognosis that a good part of the restful life we anticipated is going to become busier than ever before as we spend our lives in caregiving.

Most of us boomers are willing, at first, to take on the job. But as the reality soaks in that our lives will be changed for a long time—doing a task that may not be well received and that inevitably results in the continued decline of our loved one—we become less keen on our prospects. We know that our elders need care—but how are we as boomers to make sense of the task before us and actually make sure that it fulfills the purpose God intends?

Three Biblical Guidelines for Caregiving

As it is with anything that involves significant issues, we should first respond by going to Scripture for answers. Unfortunately, the concept of aging found in the Bible bears little resemblance to the process we face today.

In biblical days, people remained fairly active until they hit the wall of some ailment, illness, or injury that put their lives