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Was the Greatest Generation Beat?

My mother and father passed away within a few years of each other during the cold, short days of January. While I think of my folks almost daily, it is not at the anniversary of their deaths that I feel their presence most strongly. It is in the spring, when breezes are warm and days long, but the shadows cast by Memorial Day and D-day loom. My folks were part of what Tom Brokaw hailed as the “Greatest Generation” and I have no quarrel with such a label. Yet I believe an additional description, one revealing the soul of the generation, should also be considered.

For me, the “Greatest Generation” was also “Beat.”

The Beats are most famously associated with Jack Kerouac and his circa 1950’s novel “On the Road.” The general perception of them is as precursors to the hippies of the 60’s, a hard drinking, dope smoking, jazz loving, sexually open group of Greenwich Village confidants enmeshed in a bohemian lifestyle. That, however, is only part of the story. Being “beat” was not limited to lifestyle, but to an attitude about life.

In two essays, “This is the Beat Generation” (1952) and “The Philosophy of the Beat Generation” (1958), John Clellon Holmes, one of the original influences in the development of the Beat philosophy along with Kerouac, Alan Ginsberg, and William Burroughs strives to identify some of the common threads he believes runs through Americans who were born in the 1920’s and 1930’s. Raised during the Depression, forced to come of age with the advent of WWII, this group of people was at times modest, with a genuine “everybody did their part” mind set: proud, with a “we saved the world from Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito” attitude; ridiculed and taken for granted by some “baby boomers;” and, since the publication of Brokaw’s book in 1998, more appreciated than ever.

While admitting in “This is the Beat Generation” that “any attempt to label an entire generation is unrewarding” Holmes nevertheless believes these Americans seem “to possess a uniform, general quality which demands an adjective.” The term “beat” Holmes says “implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw” of having been “undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself” someone who “goes for broke and wagers the sum of his resources on a single number; and the young generation has done that continually from early youth.”

Holmes recognizes the diversity of people within the generation by citing and contrasting between a pot smoking girl, a car thief, a graduating class of ex-GI’s who think small business is dead and therefore look forward to becoming a “cog in the largest corporation,” a young New York copywriter and a hot rod driver in Los Angeles. He connects them by the expression on their faces, “bright, level, realistic, challenging” and with the statement that “behind the excess on the one hand, and the conformity on the other, lies that wait-and-see detachment that results from having to fall back for support more on one’s capacity for human endurance than one’s philosophy of life.” For this generation, Holmes states “*how* to live seems to them much more crucial than *why.*”

This seems a practical approach considering that between the Depression, WWII, and the invention of the atom bomb, the Beat generation, was the first in American history to face a combination of three sobering facts which no other, up to that point, had faced. They grew up in a world where an inexplicable “crash” of a market in New York could destroy almost everyone’s economic well-being. Matured at a time which proved there was no guarantee that America’s isolation could save them from an overseas war. Then, after surviving the most catastrophic war in history, they faced the possibility it could all be for naught with a single nuclear strike, the world they saved destroyed by their own inventiveness. Thus it seems that one of the major threads that runs throughout the Beat, the Greatest, the WWII – call it what you like – generation is the yearning for an illusive sense of security, the “stirrings of a quest” Holmes says, which spans from the “hipster” on the left to the “young Republican” on the right, each of whom “have had enough of homelessness, valuelessness, faithlessness.”

It was, in part, this alienation, this search for comfort, for stability in the wake of the disruption of so many individual lives and the ripple effect this had on families and communities that led to the questioning of societal norms by some young people and produced alternative lifestyles like the Beats. As noted, much was made at the time, and since, of the bohemian aspects of the Beats as if these defined the movement, separating it from the rest of society. But if this were true, if the Beats were so outside the mainstream, what to make of the popularity of Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Ginsberg’s *Howl*, and Burroughs *Naked Lunch*? In order for these books to enjoy the success they did at the time, people other than a small group of Greenwich Village confidants had to identify with something inside the covers. It is this connection between the “hipster” and the “young Republican” a bond formed by a shared sense of “homelessness,” loss of faith in institutions like banks, governments, family and societal traditions, even in each other, which we tend to ignore when discussing the individuals who made up the WWII generation.

People like my mother and father, Betty and Jim Pemberton, both born in the early 1920's in central Illinois, children of the Depression and survivors of WWII. Married in 1947 they searched together for the "how" of living.

James Roland Pemberton was a fair-haired boy who endured the Great Depression as an only child without a father, lived on the family farm with his maternal grandmother while his mother, Alta, earned a degree as a nurse, then moved from this relative security to a larger town where Alta found work and where Dad went through high school with his two front teeth missing (the result of a playground accident). He enlisted in the Army at eighteen – "At least the Army fixed my teeth," Dad said. "That and the GI Bill were about the only good thing they did for me" – was shipped overseas after D-Day, survived the Battle of the Bulge (of his platoon of forty men, seven walked away), charged across Europe with Patton, liberated a concentration camp and somehow made it through the European campaign only to be told he would be shipped to the Pacific.

In August of 1945, Dad read in the papers that the dropping of two "atom" bombs and the threat of a Russian invasion convinced the Japanese to accept unconditional surrender – "We were thrilled, thousands of GI's would have been killed invading Japan." A few months later he was dropped at the Bloomington train depot, alone, not even his mother there to greet him. It is safe to say that twenty-one year old Staff Sergeant James Roland Pemberton was "beat."

"After the war, I never had any urge to live anywhere but Bloomington-Normal. Never thought twice about it. And I swore I'd never be cold or wet or hungry again. I just wanted to live my life. After everything that had happened, I figured it was all gravy."

My mother, Betty Jean Bender Pemberton, was the dark-haired daughter of a second-hand furniture store owner, Charley Bender, who, it was whispered amongst the WASP's of Bloomington of the 1930's and 40's "may be Jewish." She lived with her parents, three sisters, aunt and grandmother along with various borders, in a rambling old wood-sided house on the west side. She remembered her mother, Dorothy, scurrying to the back door while Grandma Wyler visited with gypsies at the front trying to sell knick-knacks while their children sneaked around back to slip in and steal anything they could grab (to sell to the next person at the next house). They were met by a broom-swinging Dorothy, sending them on their way.

Mom took leftovers from family meals and placed them on the back stoop, the Bender house known by the hobos – "They were not bums," Mom said. "They were hobos, men riding the rails, looking for work. There was a difference."

She suffered from any number of childhood illnesses for which there were no vaccines at the time, brown eyes encased in fragile wire-rimmed glasses, yet earned a full-ride music scholarship to Illinois Wesleyan, graduating despite her old-world father's skepticism about a woman going to college. She met and married my father, survived a bout with polio, mothered five children, staying at home to do so "not because I had to, but because I wanted to. It was such a joy to have my own home, just my husband, my children, and me."

My parents longing for security was a shared one amongst people of their generation. As Kerouac writes in his first published novel, *The Town and the City*, young people were in a state of flux which “no one could see…yet everyone was in it, and it was like the incomprehensible mystery of life in the world itself, grown fantastic and homeless in war, and strangely haunted now.” For some, life became a search for “kicks…wandering ‘beat’…in search of some other job or benefactor or ‘loot’ or ‘gold’.”

The main character, Peter, joins the merchant marines and leaves home yet yearns to return, even though he realizes that home no longer exists. Out to sea he and his shipmates were “four thousand unknown miles away from home, they were all lost…And where was home? And their grievous families? And the soft, sweet summerlands they had left behind it seemed forever? They all felt this and none of them could speak of it.”

“On the Road,” of course, is the novel Kerouac is most identified with. But it is in *The Town and the City* that references to “beat,” to the sense of alienation the 1920’s born generation felt, the desire to be somewhere safe, but not knowing exactly where that is, first emerges. In his own way, within his calling, like my father, like my mother, like the millions of his generation, Kerouac is exploring the “how.” Because even in winning WWII, that generation’s task was not complete, their emerging selves probably not what they may have predicted a few short years earlier and the questions remained:

What now? Where to? How to get there?

It is this sense of unwanted change, of dislocation, of feeling weary and bitter even in victory, which is often overlooked when people view post-WWII America through rose colored glasses. Of how each soldier was affected by the war and how their absence and return impacted the lives of their children, wives, lovers, bosses, friends and everyone else with whom they came in contact. The reality of the homecoming for many veterans did not match the “we’re all in this together” motif many people associate with WWII America. For most, like my father, there were no parades or kisses on Time Square or hearty, welcome back handshakes from strangers. The return of several million men from the war proved as problematical to the many Americans who never left these shores as it did for those coming home. Yet home the survivors did return. As such they did not complain, but they carried memories of war and deprivation which would never fade.

In his book *Citizen Soldiers* historian Stephen Ambrose uses the oral recollections of soldiers like my father, frontline GI’s, to tell the story of the U.S. Army in the European theater. Three of Dad’s wartime recollections appear in the book, but it was the last entry, dated May, 1945, after he had spent one hundred forty seven days in combat and the Germans were finally defeated, that reveals the sense of relief, the possibilities of a return to normalcy, that Dad and many people, both those who served in the military and those who stayed home, must have experienced in their own way in the days after the war:

> “The night of May 8, 1945 I was looking down from our cabin on the mountain at the Inn River Valley in Austria. It was black. And then the lights in Innsbruck went on. If you have not lived in darkness for months, shielding even a match light deep in a foxhole, you can’t imagine the feeling.”

My father was twenty years old.

I think the perspectives of my dad and mom and the fictional “beat” characters in *The Town and the City* spoke for a lot of young people who, having weathered the Depression and the war were just glad to be alive, to eat, to drink, to love. They arrived at this conclusion not at middle age like so many of us, when the realization we may have lived the better part of our days hits home, but in their twenties. Imagine being that young and feeling grateful simply to be alive and free, a circumstance most generations of twenty-somethings in this country take for granted. Yet these young people were emotionally and physically spent, looking forward to three squares and a hot cup of Joe, a decent place to live, "a mild future" as a character in William Wyler's 1947 Academy Award winning film, *The Best Years of Our Lives*," puts it. Some, like my father and mother, searched for it by attempting to create a safe, orderly existence of predictable days and nights where they would "never be cold or wet or hungry again," content to "have my own home."

Many were later criticized by their children, baby boomers like me, who accused them of playing it safe, selling out and being part of the establishment, part of the problem not the solution, an absurd notion given all they risked at such young ages. By envisioning my folk's youth from a "Beat" perspective rather than nostalgic celebratory newsreels, I better understand the visceral reasons why they yearned for safety and predictability, "the how" in which they approached life.

Others, like Jack Kerouac, looked for "the how" of life outside the safety of hearth and home, while still yearning for such to some degree, pushing the limits of societal norms. Maybe Kerouac, the "hipster," and my father, the "young Republican," and others their age, set out on these individual journeys after enduring two of history's greatest challenges because they realized that escaping economic catastrophe and the absence of war was not enough. There was something more.

It was not "all gravy."

As Holmes noted, many people of his generation may have been too spent to wonder "why" they made it through to the other side:

> "Everyone who has lived through a war, any sort of war, knows that beat means not so much weariness, as rawness of nerves; not so much being "filled up to here," as being emptied out. It describes a state of mind from which all unessentials have been stripped, leaving it receptive to everything around it, but impatient with trivial obstructions. To be beat is to be at the bottom of your personality, to be looking up; to be existential in the Kierkegaard, rather than the Jean-Paul Sartre, sense."

But the question of what to do next, "how" to move forward and to fill that empty vessel of self, to make the most of the gift bestowed upon them – their lives – was still to be answered. Forever connected by a confluence of historical events, the "hipster" and the "young Republican" and the millions of walking wounded in between began their individual "quest."

Yes, they were the "Greatest." But that is so, I think, because a part of every one of them was "Beat."