

Chapter Seven (Excerpt)

The Future of Consequential Strangers

There will be possibilities for the rapid development of closeness between and among persons, a closeness which is not artificial, but is real and deep, and which will be well suited to our increasing mobility of living. Temporary relationships will be able to achieve the richness and meaning which heretofore have been associated with lifelong attachments.

—Carl Rogers, 1968

Silent Rave Strikes Back

On Friday, April 18, 2008, some two thousand people, mostly teens and college students, converged in Union Square, an historic park in lower midtown Manhattan. The gatherers came by foot, bus, and subway from the five boroughs of New York City, from the suburbs, and from points beyond. Some wore street clothes; others looked like they were headed for a night out at the clubs. A few, like the guy in the banana costume, dressed for Halloween. A buzz of expectation filled the space. Suddenly, conversation ebbed and all eyes turned to the center of the park where an eighteen-year-old Englishman, straddling a bronze statue of George Washington on horseback, began the countdown. On cue, at precisely 5:28 pm EDT, the revelers flicked on their MP3 players and began to dance, giving new meaning to the notion of marching to the beat of your own drummer—in this case, your own play list. And, yet, the swirling, booty-bumping, fist-pumping dervishes felt a strong connection.

The young man with the watch was Jonnie Wesson, a prep-school exchange student who had attended similar silent raves in London. He proposed a New York version of the BYO music event via Facebook and hoped friends would tell friends and they would tell their friends: “Imagine the pure liberation at dancing however you want to,” he wrote, “to whatever music your heart desires from Ozzy Osbourne to Justice, and not caring what anyone else thinks!” He assured Facebook members that everyone was welcome:

Punks; Goths; Ravers; Space-Cases; Indie-kids; Electro-heads; House fiends;
Commuters; Teenagers; Retirees; Businessmen; Musicians; Emos; Jocks;
Geeks; Teachers; Students; Christians; Jews; Muslims; Atheists; Agnostics;
Upper East Siders and Coney Islanders; this event is for anyone who wants to
dance and experience something truly wonderful!

Mass gatherings, organized via social networking sites, email, cell phones, and instant messages, fall under the rubric of *smart mobs*. The term was coined years ago by long-time Internet observer Howard Rheingold who presciently declared it “a new form of social organization.” One or more people get the ball rolling, but they don’t consider themselves

leaders. Some smart mobs are spurred by free agents, like Wesson, a kid with a fun idea, others by rogue groups. The participants start out as strangers but quickly become a powerful collective. The net effect might be a political statement, the conversion of public space into mass playground, or the execution of a harmless prank—like the time 111 shirtless and not particularly fit men invaded an Abercrombie & Fitch store, a subtle spoof on the company’s ads showing bare-chested hunks. “We may not be interested [in participating],” Rheingold told a reporter in 2002, “but today’s 17-year-olds are.”

Yuna Shaughnessy, a junior in high school at the time, was “pissed” that she couldn’t make the first silent rave in Union Square. Her church youth group had chartered a bus to see Pope Benedict XVII, who was then visiting New York. Shaughnessy (a random teen plucked from Facebook) attends Staten Island Tech, one of the more rigorous and competitive high schools in the City, but she can’t be easily classified. She loves to meet new people and “do spontaneous things” with her friends. She is also a serious student. That year, she had a heavy course load, was in the thick of college applications (reaching mostly for the Ivies)—and feeling very “high strung.” She had already missed the pillow fight in Union Square and the bubble battle in Times Square. So, that summer, shortly after her seventeenth birthday, when she saw an announcement for “Silent Rave Strikes Back,” scheduled for August 17, she knew she *had* to be there.

At first blush, a silent rave seems to embody our worse fears about technology’s effect on young people. But the event was neither silent nor isolating. One girl walked around with an ice-breaking sign that read, “What’s on your iPod?”—the 2008 incarnation of “What’s your sign?” Several people carried posters offering “free hugs.” When Shaughnessy’s friend’s batteries died, other dancers shared their ear buds with her. An unsteady conga line jerked its way through the crowd. Even as they bobbed and shuffled, dancers whipped out their cell phone/cameras, documenting the moment. At one point, Shaughnessy, dressed in a black spangled flapper dress, burst into a dance pit—a circle of dancers—and started “skanking” to a Real Big Fish song. “They’re a ska band, she said, knowing she had to elaborate. “Skanking is basically flailing around.” Later, she would see images of herself on YouTube, looking a lot like a commercial for iPod.

True, no music could be heard in Union Square that night, but friendly conversation and laughter punctuated the night air. And while the term *rave* generally connotes a wild affair with everyone drunk or high on Ecstasy, this wasn’t the case. “One guy I know smoked up before, but for most of us, the event itself was a natural high,” says Shaughnessy. “And it was very social. I danced, but I also talked to a lot of people when we listened to each other’s play lists or just when we were sitting on the sidelines, resting. The people who organized it set the tone. They asked you to respect the park and clean up afterwards, and people did.” The crowd was as diverse as Wesson had hoped—a cross section of every conceivable identity. It may have been this generation’s Woodstock, but no one had a bad acid trip. No one got arrested. And the only punches thrown were aimed at keeping several huge multi-colored beach balls aloft.

The New Heroes

If there's any one group whose lives and habits might give us a hint about the future of consequential strangers, it's the Millennial generation—kids like Yuna Shaughnessy. Compared to the young adults who preceded them, rebellious Baby Boomers and disaffected GenXers, Millennials, will disprove the assumption that each new generation is “more alienated and risk prone than the one before,” according to historians Neil Howe and the late William Strauss, who have written extensively on cyclical patterns of generational change. They maintain that Millennials, whom Howe and Strauss places as being born between 1982 and 2005 (other sources define them slightly differently) will be less motivated by self and more oriented toward teamwork, less inclined toward high-risk behaviors and more disposed to do good. Ultimately, they will become our next “heroes,” a role vacated by their GI-generation grandparents.

A lofty forecast perhaps, but research on Millennial voting habits and political consciousness supports their prediction. Among other factors, the historians point out, a generation is shaped by the public events they witnessed in adolescence. The oldest Millennials were barely out of high school when the Twin Towers went down in flames. Sociologist Robert Putnam also attributes a “rebirth of American civic life” to these young people: “Just as Pearl Harbor had spawned the civic-minded ‘Greatest Generation,’ so too September 11 might turn out to produce a more civically engaged generation of young people.”

In terms of their social lives, Millennials, now between the ages of four and twenty-six (using Howe and Strauss's designation), are already displaying an unparalleled sense of *interdependence*. They've been shuttled off to day care and play groups from the time they were born. Those who have since reached their teens and early twenties have strong bonds with their buddies and, at the same time, have remained close to their parents—emotionally, if no longer geographically.

Millennials are uber-connected; some fear, *over*connected. They don't remember life without computers; and to them, the cyber world is merely an extension of real-life social space. Once they're old enough to read, they email and IM; then it's on to texting, Twittering, and reading each other's home pages to see what's up. As Howe and Strauss describe them, “Millennials expect nonstop interaction with their peers.”

They're offline lives are just as social. They travel in packs and date in groups. They're aware of the power of their own convoys. “These young men and women want to have their dating lives simulate the way they meet people in real life,” a *Wall Street Journal* reporter recently observed, “through concentric circles of friends.”

Many network scholars suspect that “cyber-networks” represent an important aspect of our relational future, giving us access to information and the ability to coalesce around common interests and causes. The Internet Generation, as Millennials are sometimes called, is already there. In fact, some of the oldest members are propelling that future. Mark Zuckerberg was a college sophomore in 2003 when he launched his first social networking site, a precursor to Facebook. Daniel Osit, 26, and Adam Sachs, 25, founded Igniter.com, which enables gaggles

of twentysomethings to meet and plan group dates. Twenty-three-year-old Jordan Goldman recently snared funding for Unigo.com, a student-generated guide to colleges. In the planning stages, his focus groups consisted of high school students; now that the site is up and running, most of his 25 employees are younger than he.

Millennials see the world and their relationships through a broader lens than their elders. A silent rave naturally appeals to them because it extends their social reach. They sense that when they join forces, they can rev the motor of social change. Just as important, they were born *after* the various liberation movements and in an era that has seen a dramatic increase in ethnic and racial diversity—a trend that is project to increase even more in the decades to come. They’ve grown up (or are now growing up) watching politically-correct TV shows that routinely feature multi-hued and differently-abled casts of characters. Their own families are often untraditional. Some live with two mothers or two fathers or have parents of different nationalities or races. Others are children of immigrants and must navigate two cultures—an experience aptly described by a Cuban-American as “life in the hyphen.” Arguably, many Gen Y-ers backed Barack Obama in the 2008 Presidential election because, unlike former candidates (in either party), his background and his rhetoric epitomized a blurring of racial lines. Obama also provided them with social networking tools and trusted that their online loyalty (and dollars) would translate into offline activism. He gave them, in the words of a veteran campaign organizer, “seats at the table and allowed them to become players.”

The Millennials, admittedly new to that table, are less socially conservative than generations before them—a 2007 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that young people born after 1976 agreed with an average of only 2.4% of conservative values. That said, you’ll still find some staunch political conservatives among them, like the young Republican in Yuma Shaughnessy’s school, who is “convinced he’s going to be President one day.” There are bigots, too, as well cliques of kids who hang together and exclude others as a way of insulating themselves from prejudice. Moreover, children in rural areas or impoverished neighborhoods often don’t have the same real-life access as their more privileged peers. But as a whole and certainly through the Internet, Millennials have unprecedented opportunities to connect around cultural interests and life choices, in addition to, or instead of, the usual social divisions, such as race or religion or ethnicity.

Yuma Shaughnessy, who describes herself as “100% Korean,” is the adopted daughter of an Irish father, a computer programmer, and a Korean mother who has worked as a pharmacist throughout Yuma’s childhood. Her school, like Staten Island itself, is mostly White, but from the looks of her Facebook page, Shaughnessy’s convoy is quite diverse. “I base my relationships on personality,” she explains, “not race.” Attending a summer program at Brown University in Rhode Island, where she took a class in “writing the academic essay” and spent a week in fencing camp, she added new acquaintances from all over the world. And if the experts are right, her “multicultural competence” is just what she’ll need to thrive in the future.

Social skills have always been important—in school, at work, or in any situation that requires communication and cooperation. But the need for “social versatility” is greater today than any time in history, according to a team of sociologists who looked at family and work trends in order to determine what skills 21st century adolescents would need. Forging and maintaining adult relationships, they concluded, will require a “secure and flexible internal self that allows one to shift between worlds.” To some extent, of course, these abilities are acquired at home through a sociable and empathic parent or grandparent who models connection. But children, like adults, derive different benefits from their interactions with consequential strangers—baby sitters, teachers, advisors, coaches, clergy, as well as other kids. When teenagers are exposed, and open to, diverse groups—especially in situations that put them all on equal footing—they learn how to talk to peers who skirt the periphery of their cliques or who happen to travel in similar cyber-circles but are otherwise worlds apart. They gain the social currency that comes from being a bridge between groups. And they develop the confidence to handle the sticky situations that might arise when dissimilar worlds collide.

The truth is, all of us need these skills. Even as we have sorted ourselves into geographic enclaves that allow marketing masters to pitch directly to us and political pollsters to predict how we’ll vote, even as we do what humans have always done—gravitate toward people who are like us—we still live in a world of social complexity. . . .