

Viva the Vital

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Words from the Wise

By John Martin

Jerry Rubin, the anti-war activist and counter-cultural icon, captured the mood of the Baby Boomer generation in the turbulent 1960s when he famously said, “Don’t trust anyone over thirty.” As the largest generation in United States history to that time, Boomers launched the “youth” culture and overturned the prejudices of previous generations that equated age with sagacity.

Today Baby Boomers, ages 44 to 62, are the gray hairs. Four decades after the heyday of the Chicago Seven, Boomers are actively reinventing the culture of growing older (and growing up). And in the process, they have adopted quite a different perspective on life. Maybe, they’ve decided, there is something to the hoary notion that years confer wisdom.

As Boomers ourselves, we at the Boomer Project can’t help but wonder if there may be some truth to that idea. There is ample documentation that as Boomers get older they are more motivated by internally generated feelings and beliefs, and they are showing greater interest in spiritual matters. It’s not much of a stretch to suggest that they’re becoming more thoughtful and perceptive as well (which, as anyone over 60 would tell you is quite natural).

The Festival of the Wise, a two-day event scheduled this December in Scottsdale, Ariz., is a case study in the evolving Boomer self perception. Festival organizers understand Baby Boomers – and they know that the best way to appeal to them is not to invoke their boomerhood but to approach them indirectly. Shrewdly, the Festival bills itself as a weekend of arts, cuisine and education geared to “the Wise community.”

Other organizations around the country are holding expos and festivals for Baby Boomers, but few of them tap into the Boomers’ zeitgeist with the same acuity as The Festival of the Wise. Boomers don’t like being labeled as “seniors” or “active adults” or even “baby boomers,” as the other groups tout their events. But an event for “the wise”? Now there’s an attribute we suspect most Boomers find quite appealing.

Among the festival’s attractions is “Words from the Wise,” an opportunity for festival goers to spend 30 minutes with a videographer and “record a story for posterity.” Everyone has a story to tell, says the Festival website. “Maybe it’s a story from your life. Maybe it’s a story you heard your grandparents tell. ... This is the place to do it.”

Wisdom at Work

The Boomers’ rediscovery of wisdom as a virtue transcends sales pitches. Employers are waking up to the repository of institutional knowledge and know-how that resides within their Boomer employees. Boomers possess what Tibco Software CEO Vivek Ranadivé calls “tribal wisdom,” a storehouse of historical knowledge that provides “a complete and contextual picture” of situations that companies encounter. Businesses, he asserts, must find a way to capture and pass along this knowledge to the next generation of employees.

Here in Virginia the Older Dominion Partnership, a group helping organizations and companies prepare for the age wave of older, and retiring, Boomers found that the majority of Virginia business leaders say their companies are not prepared for the brain drain. Only two

in five (42%) say they are prepared when it comes to knowledge transfer from one generation to the next, and only 13% say they are “very prepared.” But 65% admit having wisdom walk out the door is a serious business issue they need to address.

Defining Wisdom

Although gerontologists who study “wisdom” have a hard time describing it exactly, they know it when they see it. Wisdom is the ability to draw upon a depth of knowledge and life experience to provide insight into human nature and social dynamics, and to do so with emotional detachment and objectivity.

As science writer Stephen H. Hall wrote in the *New York Times*, researchers at Stanford University have found that older people “seem to have figured out how to manage their emotions in a profoundly important way.”

Compared with younger people, they experience negative emotions less frequently, exercise better control over their emotions and rely on a complex and nuanced emotional thermostat that allows them to bounce back quickly from adverse moments. Indeed, they typically strive for emotional balance, which in turn seems to affect the ways their brains process information from their environment.

The Gen Xers and Millennials among you may find that a stretch, but you do have to concede this: After 50-some years, Boomers possess a depth of life experience. If nothing else, Boomers will try to convince younger adults that old means wise, and wise is cool.

And if the Festival of the Wise is right, Boomers will go a step further in their self appraisal. They see themselves as a Community of the Wise. And they’re eager to pass their wisdom on with a new generational watchword: “Don’t trust anyone *under* thirty.”