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Generations

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For my parents, JoAnn and Steve,
Who witnessed the birth of six generations

And for my children, Kate, Elizabeth, and Julia,
Who will see many more

CHAPTER 1

The How and Why of Generations

In the Bay of Bengal between India and Myanmar lies North Sentinel, an island about the size of Manhattan. In 2018, a 26-year-old American paid a group of fishermen to take him there. He was never seen again.

North Sentinel is the home of one of the last groups of humans isolated from the rest of the world. Outsiders have visited over the centuries, including a group of anthropologists between the 1960s and 1990s, but the tribe has made it clear they want to be left alone. Boats and helicopters that get too close are greeted by tribesmen waving spears and bows, and the few lone outsiders who have ventured there have been killed, leading India to ban boats from traveling within a three-mile radius of the island. Although the tribe uses metal from shipwrecks for their weapons, they have no modern technology. Their day-to-day lives today are, in all likelihood, barely different from how they were two hundred years ago.

As a result, parents on North Sentinel are not shooing their kids off video games and telling them to go outside and play. Parents are not worrying that their teenage children are spending too much time on TikTok. They are hunting, gathering, and cooking over an open fire instead of picking the best Amazon Fresh delivery window. With no birth control, young women on the island have children at about the same age that their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers did. We can guess that cultural values have changed little; the North Sentinelese likely follow the same rules for communal living as their ancestors.

Not so in most of the rest of the world. New technologies have reshaped social interaction and leisure time, value systems have shifted from rigid rules and strict social roles to individual expression and an embrace of diversity, and the milestones of adolescence and adulthood are now reached much later than they were seventy years ago. A time traveler from 1950 would be

shocked that same-sex marriage was legal—and then they'd probably faint after seeing a smartphone.

The breakneck speed of cultural change means that growing up today is a completely different experience from growing up in the 1950s or the 1980s—or even the 2000s. These changes have an impact: The era when you were born has a substantial influence on your behaviors, attitudes, values, and personality traits. In fact, when you were born has a larger effect on your personality and attitudes than the family who raised you does.

These differences based on birth year are most easily understood as differences among generations. Traditionally, the word *generation* has been used to describe family relationships—for example, that a three-generation household includes grandparents, parents, and children. The word *generation* is now more commonly used to refer to social generations: those born around the same time who experienced roughly the same culture growing up.

The United States is currently populated by six generations: Silents (born 1925–1945), Boomers (1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1979), Millennials (1980–1994), Generation Z (aka iGen or Zoomers, 1995–2012), and an as-yet-unnamed generation born after 2013 (I call them Polars; some marketers have called them Alphas). Generations aren't just an American phenomenon; most other countries have similar generational divisions, though with their own cultural twists.

Not that long ago, it was difficult to determine whether and how generations differed from each other, even on average. More than one pundit has complained that musings on generations occasionally resemble horoscopes. They have a point: Many books and articles on generational differences are long on subjective observations but short on hard data. Others poll a small segment of people and attempt to draw broad conclusions. With the age of Big Data upon us, that no longer needs to be the case. In these pages, you'll find the results of generational analyses spanning twenty-four datasets including thirty-nine million people—nearly as many people as live in California, the most populous state in the U.S. With so much data, it's possible to get a better understanding of generational differences than ever before.

Appreciating generational differences is crucial for understanding family relationships (Why is my teen always on her phone? Why do my parents not know what nonbinary is?), the workplace (Why are younger employees so different? Why does my boss think that way?), mental health (Which

generations are more likely to be depressed, and why?), politics (How will each generation vote as they grow older?), economic policy (Are Millennials actually poor?), marketing (What does each generation value?), and public discourse (Why are more young people so negative about the country? Is putting your pronouns in your email signature just a fad?). These questions capture just a few of the reasons why generations are endlessly discussed online. At a time when generational conflict—from work attitudes to cancel culture to "OK, Boomer"—is at a level not seen since the 1960s, separating the myths from the reality of generations is more important than ever.

Studying the ebb and flow of generations is also a unique way to understand history. Events such as wars, economic downturns, and pandemics are often experienced differently depending on your age. Having Dad at home because he was laid off during the recession might be fun for the kids but terrifying for Dad. However, history is not just a series of events; it's also the ebb and flow of a culture and all that entails: technology, attitudes, beliefs, behavioral norms, diversity, prejudice, time use, education, family size, divorce. What your grandmother called "living in sin" is today's accepted unmarried partnership. What a teenager now considers entertaining (Instagram scrolling) is very different from what her parents considered entertaining when they were teens (driving around with their friends).

Generational differences also provide a glimpse into the future. Where will we be in ten years? Twenty? Because some traits and attitudes change little with age or change in predictable ways, the data—especially on younger people—can show us where we are going as well as where we are. Although people continue to change throughout their lives, our fundamental views of the world are often shaped during adolescence and young adulthood, making the younger generations a crystal ball for what is to come.

I've spent my entire academic career—more than thirty years—studying generational differences. It all began when I noticed something odd while working on my college honors thesis in 1992: College women in the 1990s scored as significantly more assertive and independent on a common personality test than their counterparts in the 1970s. But this was at the University of Chicago, where everyone is a little weird, so I thought it might just be a fluke. After getting the same result the next year with undergraduates at the University of Michigan (who were considerably less weird), I realized there might be something more systemic going on. A few months of library work later, I'd found a steady rise in college women's self-

reported assertiveness and independence across 98 psychology studies from 1973 to 1994—a result that made perfect sense given the shift in women's career aspirations over that time. I'd documented my first generational difference.

Over the coming years, I would gather studies from scientific journals ensconced on dusty shelves, finding generational differences in personality traits, self-views, and attitudes. By the mid-2000s, large, nationally representative datasets became accessible online, including the results of huge surveys of young people conducted across the country since the 1960s. Other sources of data, like the Social Security Administration database of baby names and Google's huge database on language use in books, both of which draw from data going back to the 1800s, appeared online as well, giving additional glimpses into how the culture was changing.

Seeing big shifts in self-confidence, expectations, and attitudes around equality, I wrote a book on Millennials, called *Generation Me*, in 2006. When optimism plummeted and teen depression rose during the smartphone era, I wrote a book on Generation Z, called *iGen*, in 2017. But as I traveled the country giving talks about *iGen*, managers, parents, and college faculty would ask, "But hasn't new technology affected all of us?" Or they'd want to know, "Do other generations also look different now from before?" This book is the answer to those questions—and to many others about Silents, Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z, and Polars.

To begin, let's consider two broader questions. First, what causes generational differences? And second, how can we discover the actual differences among generations?

What Causes Generational Differences?

Unlike the more static culture of a place like North Sentinel Island, modern societies are always changing. Cultural change leads to generational change as each generation effectively grows up in a different culture. But which specific cultural changes are the most responsible for generational differences?

The classic theories of generational change focus almost exclusively on just one aspect of cultural change: major events. In the 1920s, Karl Mannheim wrote that "generation units" who experienced the same events while they were young were bonded by common experiences. In the 1970s, sociologist Glen Elder found that people who experienced the Great Depression as children were different from those who experienced it as adults. In the 1990s, William Strauss and Neil Howe theorized that American generations cycled through four different types, with each type in a particular life stage when the country was seized by major events, such as the Civil War or World War II; for example, the GI or "Greatest" generation born 1901–1924 was the "civic" type, perfect for rising adults leading the country through war. Many presentations and books on generations start with a list of the events each generation experienced when they were young, like the Vietnam War for Boomers; fears of nuclear war with Russia for Gen X; September 11, 2001, for Millennials; and the COVID-19 pandemic for Gen Z.

Major events can certainly shape a generation's worldview. Those who lived through the Great Depression, for example, were often frugal for the rest of their lives. However, this view of generations as shaped by cycles of events misses the rest of cultural change—all the ways in which life today is so different from life twenty years ago, fifty years ago, or one hundred years ago. A hundred years ago, household tasks like laundry and cooking took so much time and effort that much of the population could do little else. As recently as the 1990s, publicly sharing an opinion on politics meant physically attending a protest or writing a letter to the editor and hoping it got printed; it now involves a few keystrokes on a smartphone to create a post on social media. In much of the U.S. in the mid-20th century, Whites accepted racial segregation as normal, while today it is considered morally repugnant. The average woman born in 1930 ended her education with high school,

married at 20, and had two kids by 25, while the average woman born in 1990 went to college and was unmarried with no children at 25. These cultural changes were not caused solely by major events—for one thing, they are linear, moving in roughly the same direction year after year, rather than cycling in and out like recessions or pandemics.

So what is the root cause of these cultural changes—and thus the root cause of generational differences? It should be something that keeps progressing year after year, and something with a big impact on day-to-day life. The strongest candidate is technology.

Technology has completely changed the way we live—and the way we think, behave, and relate to each other. Unlike the ebb and flow of wars, pandemics, and economic cycles, technological change is linear. The mode may change (say, from TV sets to streaming video), but technology keeps moving in roughly the same direction: easier, faster, more convenient, more entertaining. Technology and its aftereffects—on culture, behavior, and attitudes—have broken the old cycles of generations to form something novel. This model—let's call it the Technology Model of Generations—is a new theory of generations for the modern world.

Technology isn't just tablets or phones. The first humans to make controlled fire, invent the wheel, plant crops, or use written symbols were using technology (defined as "science or knowledge put into practical use to solve problems or invent useful tools"). Today, technology includes everything that makes our modern lives possible, from medical care to washing machines to multistory buildings. Large cities, with many people living close to each other, are not sustainable without modern architecture, sanitation, and transportation, all things made possible by technology. Our lives are strikingly different from the lives of those in decades past, primarily due to the technology we rely on. That's why it's reasonable to guess that the culture on North Sentinel Island is similar now compared with a hundred years ago, because the people of North Sentinel have experienced very little technological change.

On the surface, many cultural changes don't seem related to technology at all. What does same-sex marriage have to do with technology? Or the shift from formal to casual clothing in the workplace? Or the trend toward having children later in life? In fact, each of these cultural changes is, ultimately, due to technology—via a few other intervening causes (we'll come back to these questions later).

Technological change isn't just about stuff; it's about how we live, which influences how we think, feel, and behave. As just one example, the technological change of agriculture about ten thousand years ago completely transformed the way humans lived, with downstream effects on cultural attitudes and beliefs. With more stable homesteads, personal property became more important and societies of more people became possible, resulting in a more collective mindset and more emphasis on following rules. While hunter-gatherers lived in small groups, agriculture led to larger towns and eventually complex societies that required more structure and cooperation. In more recent times, certain technological developments have ultimately led to behavioral and attitude changes far beyond the device itself (see Figure 1.1).

Technology	Primary Years of Growth	Downstream Consequences
Television	1947–1990	Immediate experience of events; exposure to other regions and cultures; decline of reading; materialism
Home appliances (microwaves, washing machines, refrigerators)	1947–1985	Ability to live alone; women pursuing careers; increase in leisure time
Air-conditioning	1950s–1980s	Population growth in the U.S. South and West; fewer people socializing outside
Birth control	1960–1969	More premarital sex; lower birth rate; women pursuing careers
Computer technology	1964–2005	Increase in skills and education necessary for many jobs; rise in work productivity
Internet news	2000–2010	Instant access to information; decline of newspapers; ability to filter news to preferences
Social media	2006–2015	Ability to reach large social network; decline in face-to-face social interaction; political polarization

Figure 1.1: Examples of the wide-reaching effects of technological advancements

Technology also contributes to many of the major events prized in classic generational theories. Consider airplanes, a key technological development of the 20th century. Airplanes played a role in at least four major events of the

last one hundred years: World War II (where planes were used in combat, including dropping the first nuclear bomb), 9/11 (where planes were used as weapons), and the AIDS and COVID-19 pandemics (where both viruses spread via airplane travel).

A classic anecdote relates the story of an anthropologist gathering origin stories from hunter-gatherer tribes. One elder says the earth rests on the back of a giant turtle. “But what does the turtle rest on?” the anthropologist asks. “Oh,” says the elder. “It’s turtles all the way down.” The story evokes the image of a chain of turtles, with the smallest at the top and each turtle below a little bigger as the chain fades down into infinity. Although meant to illustrate the limitations of origin stories, the idea of turtles resting on progressively larger turtles has always reminded me of the search for ultimate causes of phenomena: Each cause leads to another below it, in an endless chain of turtles, making it difficult to see what is really causing things to change.

Sometimes, though, the chain does have an ultimate origin. For generational differences, that origin is technology. Technology does not always cause generational differences directly—there are intervening causes as well, which we can think of as daughter turtles resting on the back of the big mother turtle of technology. Two of these intervening causes are individualism (more focus on the individual self) and a slower life trajectory (taking longer to grow to adulthood, and longer to age). A modern theory of generations can be modeled this way (see Figure 1.2), with technology as the root cause of the intervening forces of individualism and a slower life and a side role for major events. Technological change is the mother turtle, individualism and a slower life are the daughters, and major events are friends of the family that show up every once in a while.

This model is not completely comprehensive—there are certainly some causes of generational differences not included here, like income inequality—but it captures the strongest influences. Along with the direct impacts of technology, individualism and a slower life trajectory are the key trends that define the generations of the 20th and 21st centuries.

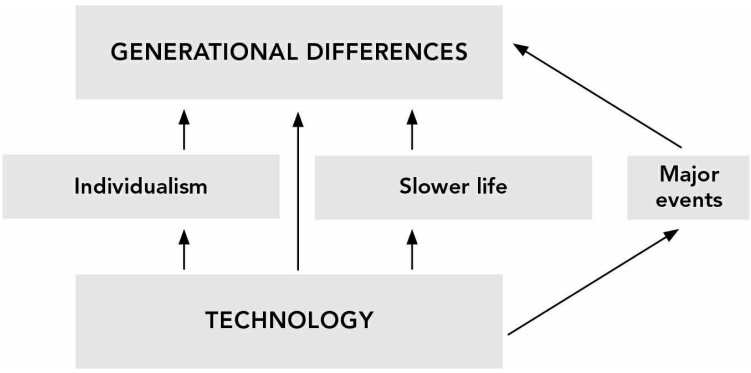

Figure 1.2: The Technology Model of Generations

Notes: Major events include wars, terrorist attacks, economic cycles, pandemics, natural disasters, crime waves, impactful people, and other factors.

Daughter Turtle 1: Individualism. Individualism, a worldview that places more emphasis on the individual self, is often discussed in the context of world cultures. Individualistic cultures such as the U.S. value freedom, independence, and equality, while more collectivistic cultures such as South Korea instead value group harmony and rule-following.

Levels of individualism also vary over time. Two hundred years ago—say, in early 1800s Regency era England, when Jane Austen's novels take place—behaviors and life choices were heavily constrained. Gender, race, and class were destiny. Many boys entered the same profession as their fathers. Nearly all upper-class women married by age 25 and had children; those of the lower classes married or became servants. Lower-class men and all women could not vote, and slavery was legal. There were some individual freedoms, particularly for upper-class men, but even those men were required to follow strict rules for dress, speech, and behavior. The culture strongly promoted the idea that individuals should sacrifice for the greater good, with, for example, young men expected to fight in the military if they were asked.

Over the decades, these social rules began to fall. By the 1960s and 1970s the highly individualistic world we know today had begun to emerge in many countries around the world: Personal choice was paramount, the U.S. military became an all-volunteer force, and "do your own thing" became a mantra. Sacrificing for the greater good was less prized. Treating people as individuals means setting aside the idea of group membership as destiny, which gave rise to movements for individual rights based on gender, race, and class, enshrining equality as a core value of the culture.

With so much reliance on the self, it was important that people feel good about themselves, so viewing the self positively received more emphasis. Between 1980 and 2019, individualistic phrases promoting self-expression and positivity became steadily more common in the 25 million books scanned in by Google (see Figure 1.3; you can try this database yourself by googling "ngram viewer"). Assuming verbal language mirrored written language, Boomers growing up in the 1950s were only rarely told "just be yourself" or "you're special," but Millennials and Gen Z'ers heard these phrases much more often. Writing "I love me" would have garnered questions about tautology and perhaps onanism in 1955, but was an accepted expression of high self-esteem by the 2000s.

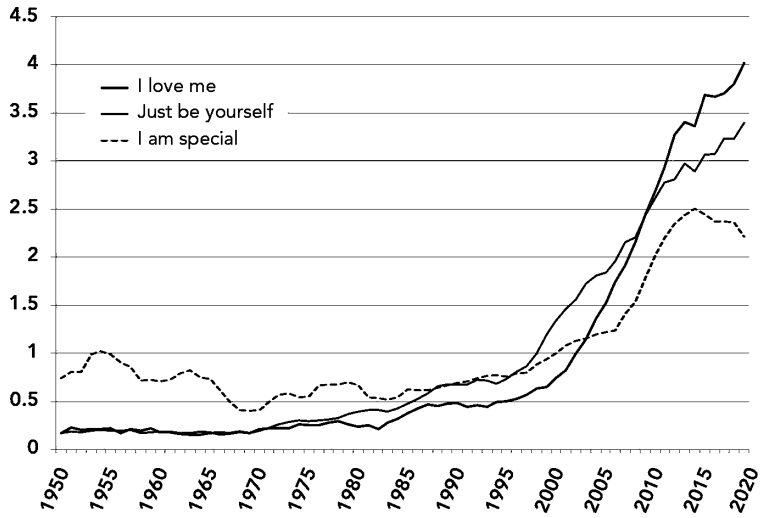

Figure 1.3: Use of individualistic phrases in American books, 1950–2019

Source: Google Books database

Notes: Shows the percentage of each phrase in all books published in that year. Percentages are smoothed across three years. The scale has been adjusted for some phrases by factors of 10 so they can appear in the same figure; the phrases are not actually equally common.

Two important caveats are worth mentioning. First, neither individualism nor collectivism is all good or all bad. They both involve trade-offs, and whether one judges the outcomes of either system as good or bad is heavily influenced by which system you were raised in. For example, is it good or bad that Western societies have become more accepting of single parents? Your answer partially depends on whether you lean toward individualism or collectivism. In general, individualism has the advantage of more individual

freedom and choice, and the downside of more social disconnection; collectivism offers less choice but tighter social connections.

Second, it's important not to conflate individualism and collectivism with political ideologies—they are not the same. Conservatism embraces some aspects of individualism (favoring light regulation of the individual by government) and some aspects of collectivism (emphasizing family and religion). Liberalism prizes individualism's insistence that race, gender, and sexual orientation should not restrict rights or opportunities, but also supports collectivistic social policies such as government-funded health care. Thus, it's best to think of individualism and collectivism as cultural systems, not political ideologies. The one possible exception is libertarianism, a political philosophy that takes some views from the liberal basket and others from the conservative one and overlaps with individualism to a good degree. But individualism and collectivism are not proxies for Democrats and Republicans.

In the Technology Model of Generations, individualism is caused by technology. How? Technology makes individualism possible. Until well into the 20th century, it was difficult to live alone or to find the time to contemplate being special, given the time and effort involved in simply existing. There was no refrigeration, no running water, no central heating, and no washing machines. Modern grocery stores didn't exist, and cooking involved burning wood. Those who could afford it hired servants to do the enormous amount of work involved, but the poor did it all themselves (or were the servants doing it for someone else). Daily living in those eras was a collective experience.

In contrast, modern citizens have the time to focus on themselves and their own needs and desires because technology has relieved us of the drudgery of life. Being able to hit the drive-thru at McDonald's and get a hot meal in under five minutes is not an unmitigated good, but it's a prime example of the amazing convenience of modern life and the flexibility it allows the individual. Or consider laundry: Instead of slaving over a hot cauldron for an entire day, often with a group of other people, you throw your clothes in a machine and go watch TV for forty minutes. Then you put your clothes in the dryer and watch more TV. Electric washing machines were not widely used until the late 1940s, and clothes dryers were not common until the 1960s. In 1940s rural Minnesota, my grandparents and their neighbors used outside

clotheslines for drying. If there was an unexpected cold snap, the clothes would freeze solid.

Technology also made the middle class possible. With labor-saving devices decreasing the need for servants and farmworkers, more people could do other types of work, and most of that work paid better and allowed for more freedom. One of the great success stories of 20th century America was the emergence of a stable middle class. A society where most people consider themselves middle class (70% of Americans did so in 2017) is fertile breeding ground for individualism, which posits that everyone is equal. That belief is easier to hold when daily chores require less time and thus less division of labor based on gender, race, and class.

Overall, technological progress shifted economies away from agricultural and household work, which required many people to work together collectively, to information and service work, which are often performed more independently. People still work together, but family farms and family businesses are less common. Large cities, which promote individualism as they allow people to live fairly anonymously without their behavior being monitored by everyone else (as is common in small towns), are made possible by technology. Technology also favors paid work that relies more on verbal and social abilities and less on physical strength, which brings more women into the workplace, promoting more gender equality.

More recent technological progress has also gone hand in hand with individualism. When people first bought TVs, they had one per family. TVs were so big they were often styled with wood on the outside like a piece of furniture. Then it became popular to have more than one TV in a house so members of the family could watch different things. Now each family member has their own phone or tablet, complete with streaming video and earbuds, so each person can watch exactly what they want to when they want to.

Technological change doesn’t always result in uniformly high individualism—for example, Japan is a collectivistic country immersed in technology. But individualism can’t exist without modern technology. Every individualistic country in the world is an industrialized nation, although not every industrialized nation is individualistic.

Let’s return to two of the questions we posed earlier: What does same-sex marriage have to do with technology? What about the shift from formal to casual clothing in the workplace? Both of these changes are rooted in

technology's daughter, individualism. Individualistic countries were the first to embrace equal rights for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people, while more collectivistic countries have not. Same-sex marriage is legal in the Netherlands and Canada but is not in China or Saudi Arabia. The link between individualism and LGB rights is also true over time. As cultures grow more individualistic, they place more emphasis on individual choice and less on everyone being the same. For most of the 20th century, Western cultures shunned same-sex relationships because they were different, with these beliefs often intertwined with collectivistic religious tenets. Same-sex relationships also challenge the traditional social structure of male-female marriage and family-building that forms the basis of collectivistic societies. When families come in many shapes and sizes in an individualistic culture, however, LGB relationships are just another variation. LGB family-building is also directly impacted by technology, with assisted reproductive technology enabling gay and lesbian couples to have genetic children via intrauterine insemination, egg donation, and surrogacy.

Individualism also promotes equal treatment on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, and transgender status. Individualism is at the root of the civil rights movement, of Black Lives Matter, of the feminist movement, of the gay rights movement, and of the transgender rights movement. It says: You are who you are, and you should be treated equally. The charming novel *Nine Ladies*, by Heather Moll, imagines the aristocratic Mr. Darcy from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* time-traveling from 1812, when race, gender, and class were destiny, to 2012. He's of course amazed by smartphones, airplanes, and restaurants, but the advice the born-in-1987 version of Elizabeth Bennet gives him the most often is, "Remember, treat everyone equally." Equality is one of the unifying themes of cultural change over the last one hundred years, making it one of the unifying themes of generational change.

The ascendance of casual clothing is a more trivial but tangible result of individualism. In the early 20th century, leaving the house usually meant a suit and hat for men and a dress and gloves for women—and often a tight girdle. People dressed this way even in their time off. Pictures of the crowd at baseball games in the 1950s reveal a sea of men wearing formal suits, ties, and hats—fedoras, not baseball caps. Tennis shoes are called that because people once wore them only to play tennis. During this era, the goal of

clothing was to communicate status. Being respectable meant dressing a certain way to be presentable to others.

Individualism turns this around: The goal of clothing is for the person wearing it to be comfortable. It's a material example of the individualistic advice that "you shouldn't care about what other people think of you." We still do, of course—otherwise we might go to the office naked, or wearing pajamas—but the balance between individual comfort and other-focused status-signaling has definitely started to tilt toward comfort.

Daughter Turtle 2: A slower life. Technology also leads to another cultural trend that's had an enormous impact on how we live: taking longer to grow up, and longer to grow older. This trend isn't about the pace of our everyday lives, which has clearly gotten faster, but about when people reach milestones of adolescence, adulthood, and old age, like getting a driver's license, getting married, and retiring.

In my daughter's desk drawer, there's a picture of my maternal grandparents and four of their eight children, taken in the late 1950s. They stand outside their farmhouse in rural Minnesota. My grandmother wears a white-and-blue dress, my grandfather wears a suit and a beige fedora hat, and my mother and her siblings wear their Easter best, including small hats for my mother and aunt Marilyn, a bow tie for my uncle Mark, and a blue suit coat and movie-star pompadour for my uncle Bud.

Their lives, from childhood to old age, followed a different trajectory from today. My grandmother, born in 1911, went to school only until the 8th grade and married at 19. She had eight children over eighteen years (the youngest was born on the day of the eldest's high school prom). In the picture, my grandmother is 47, but she looks like she's in her mid-fifties or early sixties. My grandfather, born in 1904, went to school only through the 6th grade before he left to work on his family's farm. He's in his mid-fifties in the picture, but looks closer to retirement age.

Their children, born between 1932 and 1950, grew up doing work around the farm—milking the cows, mucking out the stalls, feeding the chickens, making the meals. They also had the run of the neighborhood. One of Uncle Bud's favorite stories is about the time he and his brothers went skinny-dipping in the river and the neighborhood girls stole their clothes. I asked him how old he was when that happened and was surprised when he said, "eight or nine"—it's hard to imagine many American kids with that kind of freedom

now. It wasn't just farm kids—my father, who grew up in a medium-sized city in the same era, described roaming the neighborhood with his friends when he was still in grade school, playing baseball in the summer and ice-skating in the winter. This was childhood in the mid-20th century: You had responsibilities, but you also had freedom. Mothers told their children to play outside as long as they were home by dinner; parents considered it normal for 8-year-olds to be gone, unsupervised by adults, for the entire day. In more recent decades, however, few children have this much independence. Even teens have their every move tracked by their parents via smartphone apps.

What changed? A model called life history theory gives some insight. Life history theory observes that parents have a choice: They can have many children and expect them to grow up quickly (a fast life strategy) or they can have fewer children and expect them to grow up more slowly (a slow life strategy).

The fast life strategy is more common when the risk of death is higher both for babies and for adults, and when children are necessary for farm labor. Under those conditions, it is best to have *more* children (to increase the chances that some will survive) and to have those children *early* (to make sure the children are old enough to take care of themselves before one or both parents dies).

In the late 1800s, an incredible 1 out of 6 babies died in their first year—so for every six women who had a baby, one would lose the child within a year. Infant mortality declined precipitously during the 20th century, but 1 out of 14 babies still died in their first year when the first of the Silent generation were born in 1925. When the first Boomers were born in 1946, 1 out of 30 babies died before reaching their 1st birthday (see Figure 1.4). Infant mortality did not dip below 1 out of 100 until 1988; in 2020, it had decreased to 1 out of 200.