



Written by [Robin Kinderman](#) on March 5, 2018

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## The Making of Millennials

*Selfie*, a book on the Millennial generation, not only explains why Millennials are the way they are, but also tells the history behind how they got that way.

I've been disputing it for a few years now, but it seems that no matter which source I read, I find that I am part of the Millennial generation. I don't like this. I was born in 1985. My childhood was spent outside, not in front of a computer, and I didn't have my first cellphone until I was 18. I don't take pictures of myself with my phone — in fact, my phone isn't even my primary camera — and I don't post minute-by-minute updates of my life on social media. I don't want anything to do with all the negative stereotypes that are associated with being a "Millennial."



And so, when a book entitled *Selfie: How We Became So Self-Obsessed and What It's Doing to Us* by Will Storr came across my desk, I was instantly intrigued. Surely this book would justify my reasoning that I wasn't a Millennial, right?

Wrong. What I learned in reading this book was that I am in fact — as much as I hate it — a product of the self-esteem movement of the late '80s and early '90s that resulted in Millennials being so self-centered. Whether I like it or not, I possess personality traits that are purely and completely Millennial. Let me explain.

Storr doesn't focus just on today's 20-somethings. Instead, he investigates history to explain and understand how we arrived at this point.

He sections the book into different parts of the Self: the Dying Self, the Tribal Self, the Perfectible Self, the Bad Self, the Good Self, the Special Self, and the Digital Self.

The Dying Self — the very beginning of the book — grabs one's attention with a relevant hot topic. Why are suicide rates higher today than they have ever been before? Why are so many people — young people — on medication for depression and anxiety? Studies show that those who commit suicide are often obsessed with "social perfectionism" — perfection according to what they think other people expect of them. When people's lives fall short of these high expectations and they feel they have lost control, suicide becomes a risk.

I'm sure many of you reading this are already thinking to yourselves, "Social media is to blame for this." Evidence says you would be correct in that assumption. While doing research for his book, Storr met with several doctors and social scientists, one being Professor Gordon Flett. Flett told him that the modern world is giving people a greater number of opportunities to feel like failures. Social media has



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enabled a phenomenon he called the “Perfectionist Presentation,” which Flett said is the tendency to put on a false front of seeming perfect, where you cover up mistakes and shortcomings.... You’ll see this especially among younger people, who portray their lives on social media. For the person who feels they need to keep up with others, that seems to be an added pressure. It’s like, “here’s my perfect life, take a look at it.”

This was the paragraph that hit a nerve with me. This is exactly what I and all my friends were doing on social media — posting about everything that has gone well, but not about everything that hasn’t — and it was having a negative effect on me. I felt I was lagging in life. My first stint at college was a disappointment, so I ended up going for round two, which resulted in me not landing a “professional” job until I was 29. I don’t own a house yet; I’m not married; and I don’t feel financially stable. All my friends are doing great, though — they constantly post pictures and status updates of their new vehicles, their perfectly baked cookies, their trips to Italy and Mexico, their new offices, their beautiful children, etc. How are they able to do all this?! Where have I gone wrong?!

The answer is that I haven’t. Sure, if I had made some smarter choices in my early 20s, I could be better off right now, but my situation is not uncommon. The problem is that social media, especially Facebook, enables us to share only what we want to share, and of course, we share only the most perfect moments because this makes us feel better about ourselves. This makes us feel like we’re keeping up with everyone else. Storr quotes Gregory Ells, director of counseling and psychological services at Cornell University, as saying, “Social media is a huge contributor to the misperception among students that peers aren’t also struggling.” Posting pictures of your perfect moments may make you feel successful, but it’s only temporary. The more permanent feeling is one of depression and angst as you scroll through endless pics of everyone else’s perfect lives.

After this overall diagnosis of the problems inflicted on the Millennial generation, Storr goes into the history of the Self, describing how each stage in the development of the Self gave us personality traits that evolved into the current self-obsessed person of the 21st century.

In the very beginning, there was the Tribal Self. The Tribal Self is animalistic. People are by nature group-oriented, and to survive in a group, we must care about status within the hierarchy of the group. We are wired to judge others. Storr writes that upon meeting someone new, we automatically encode three points of information: age, gender, and race. Studies have shown that we prefer our own race — people of our race are part of our group — therefore they are safe. It was also within the era of the Tribal Self that humans defined what exactly makes one a “good” person: selflessness. A good person was one who always looked out for the benefit and well-being of others.

Next came the Perfectible Self, thanks to the Greeks. The Greeks were obsessed with physical beauty. To be fit and beautiful meant you were an ethically good person. It was out of Greek civilization that we got the Olympics, a contest of the very best athletes in the world. The Greeks also gave us the “Hero story”: With great power and courage, you can change your life and your world. Therefore, one should always strive to be perfect.

After the Greeks came the Christians, and what Storr calls the Bad Self. Christianity frowned on the Greeks’ obsession with physical beauty and selfishness. One’s life should be in pursuit of pleasing God and serving others, instead of oneself. Doing what is pleasing to God (what is right) is what leads to happiness. The Catholic religion teaches humility. A good person is one who is hard-working, humble,



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and in service to God. Storr writes that the Christians had taken the pursuit of the perfect self and turned it inwards — life was a continual battle to make their inner selves better with prayer, self denial, and flagellation. Perfection lies with God.

Speeding ahead into the 20th century, we stumble upon the Good Self, a product of the “Great Compression,” a time Storr says economists describe as a narrowing of the income gap between 1945 and 1975 that resulted in higher wages, more college graduates, automation, and corporations. In this new metropolitan world, to get ahead meant one had to get along with the group. This meant being likeable. It was during this era that books such as *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie were published. This was the era that produced Carl Rogers, a psychologist who, expanding on Maslow’s Actualization of Self, promoted the idea that for a person to be his best self, he needs to be in an environment of openness, acceptance, and empathy. He needs to be free of society’s judgment and disdain. Rogers pioneered the Human Potential Movement, which spawned experiments, classes, and studies. The result was a mass of people who now felt they didn’t have to answer to the authority of anyone — if they wanted to be happy (and why wouldn’t anyone else want them to be happy?), they must listen only to their “imperial inner selves.”

Out of this new phenomenon came a base camp to continue these classes and observations of people. Enter stage left, the Esalen Institute. The Esalen Institute, based in Big Sur, California, was a “retreat” for those looking to explore their true, inner selves. Along with meditation and yoga, Esalen’s main goal was to get people to reveal their true selves. Storr spends the better part of his book on Esalen and its effects on society, but it can mostly be summed up in this statement from Sociology Professor Marion Goldman:

Esalen played a critical role in introducing and promoting esoteric spirituality so that it flowed into mainstream culture.... Millions of contemporary Americans identify themselves as spiritual, not religious, because the Institute paved the way for them to explore spirituality without affiliating with established denominations.... The basic assumption that God is part of all beings and that we are gods is Esalen’s cornerstone.

At the same time Esalen was taking over the country, a new, revolutionary book also had people thinking in a different light. *Atlas Shrugged*, published in 1957 by Ayn Rand — a woman who had witnessed the destruction of Russia by communists as a child — had taken the country by storm. Storr writes, “The book was a hymn to individualism, a moral argument that human civilization was the work of single-minded creators who needed, more than anything, to be free in order to build.” Ayn Rand once said, “Men have been taught that the highest virtue is not to achieve, but to give. Yet one cannot give that which has not been created. The first right on earth is the right of the ego.”

Although *Atlas Shrugged* condemned socialism and championed capitalism and free markets, its influence, along with that of the Esalen Institute, led to the Special Self.

The era of the Special Self is the one I am most familiar with. This was the time — during the late ’80s and early ’90s — that California assemblyman John Vasconcellos decided that self-esteem was the answer to ending society’s problems. If we could just get people to feel good about themselves, there wouldn’t be any more unemployment, abuse, domestic violence, educational failure, etc. I am too young to remember John Vasconcellos, but I do remember the result of his campaign. His “Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility” spread like wildfire and infected



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elementary schools across America. Rather than just academics, children were being taught that they were special, and they mattered. I can remember sitting in the gym in first grade with all my classmates for a “concert” — a man with a guitar who sang songs about being special and feeling good. I still have that tape somewhere. I remember earning a ribbon for 10th place in third grade for track and field. I knew I wasn’t any good, and I thought it was kind of a joke that I received a ribbon. I still remember the day they stopped keeping score at my brothers’ Little League games. I asked my mom what the point of playing was if they weren’t keeping score. She replied that it was “just to have fun.” I remember in fourth grade, I used to get so upset at math problems that I would be on the verge of crying; the teacher would tell me it was okay and to just skip those problems. To this day, I don’t know how to do long division.

The self-esteem movement may have lasted only a decade or so, but its effects carried on in my generation — something I only now realized in reading this book. It may have been partially self-esteem training and partially how I was raised, but I have always had an issue with authority: When taking on a new job, I have more than once gotten in trouble for not following directions because I thought my way of doing things was better. I have always shied away from things that don’t contribute to my good mood; I hate confrontation and negativity. You might think that this is human nature, but after reading this book, I see it as being a product of the self-esteem movement and the Millennial generation. The Right is correct in calling us “snowflakes.” We were raised to be special. We try not to do or partake in anything that hurts our feelings. We don’t want to listen to others’ opinions. We don’t want to take directions from anyone except ourselves. The world is our oyster. If you don’t like that, then move along.

Social media has only added to this mess, as Storr explains in the last chapter, the Digital Self. In 2006, *Time* magazine awarded their annual Person of the Year award to “You.” Storr writes,

“You” had arrived, and to get along and get ahead in this new you-saturated arena, you had to be a better you than all the other yous that were suddenly surrounding you. You had to be more entertaining, more original, more beautiful, with more friends, have wittier lines and more righteous opinions, and you’d best be doing it looking stylish in interesting places with your breakfast healthy, delicious and beautifully lit.

Storr wraps up his book with a narrative on our current political era and the role the Millennial generation has played in it. This especially opened my eyes, for I saw myself as he described:

Social media appears to be making what was already a serious problem worse. Every day, millions of us are needled and outraged by the hysterically stated views of those with whom we don’t agree. Our irritation pushes us into a place of fiercer opposition. The more emotional we become, the less rational we become, the less able to properly reason. In an attempt to quieten the stress, we begin muting, blocking, de-friending and unfollowing. And we’re in an echo chamber now, shielded from diverse perspectives that might otherwise have made us wiser and more empathetic and open. Safe in the digital cocoon we’ve constructed, surrounded by voices who flatter us with agreement, we become yet more convinced of our essential rightness, and so pushed even further away from our opponents, who by now seem practically evil in their bloody-minded wrongness.

Storr’s solution to this current state of self-obsession is pretty simple and straightforward. We must accept that we are not gods. The world does not revolve around us. We are neither perfect nor



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infallible. We are all flawed. It's once we free ourselves from society's demands that we can truly be happy. Rather than spend so much time on ourselves, we need to spend time on our environment: our family, friends, workplace, neighborhood, the city we live in. And most importantly, in my opinion, we need to get off social media. We need to return to actually spending time with those we care about, engaged in face-to-face conversation, discussing topics we may not agree with. We need to get out of the bubbles we've created and return to the real world, the one full of complicated, flawed, fallible human beings. It is only through this that we can get away from the stigmas that have enveloped the Millennial generation and become productive citizens who contribute to society and restore this country to its former glory.

*Photo of Millennials taking a selfie: Photo at top: Anchiy/E+/ Getty Images*

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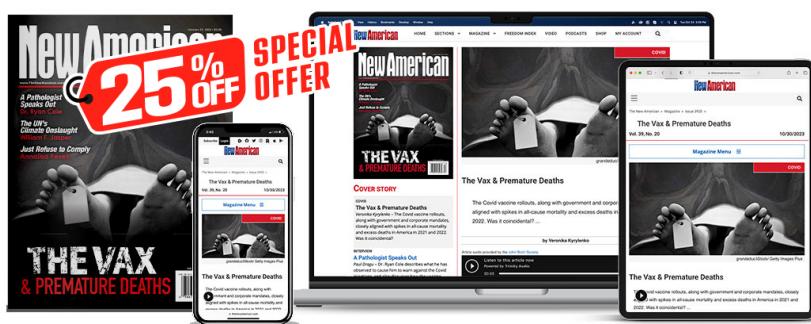
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