

A Cubicle Is Not a Home

Maybe this younger generation is populated by those who are willing (or able) to trade slightly less money for slightly more contentment.

By [Anna Quindlen](#)

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May 29, 2006 issue - Creeping codgerism is an inevitable effect of getting older, a variation of memory loss. When I complain that my daughter's skirt looks more like a belt, or that my sons keep vampire hours, those are the churlish carplings of a woman years removed from the days when her own dresses were sky-high and her idea of a good time was sleeping until noon. "Turn down that music," I have been known to yell, and my only saving grace is that I hear the words through a filmy curtain of generational déjà vu.

Perhaps that is the kindest way to explain why Hillary Rodham Clinton veered off the grid of common sense to complain in a speech recently that young people today "don't know what work is." As she talked of an unfortunate sense of youthful entitlement and the good old days when there was only a single TV in her own home, it seemed as though any minute she would soar to the rhetorical heights of codger deluxe and describe walking five miles through the snow to school.

The senator was indulging in a time-honored tradition, the older generation's complaining that the younger one is not like them, and therefore somehow not as good. Maybe there is anecdotal evidence of absurd indulgence on television: teenage girls' being gifted with BMWs at lavish birthday parties or peevish brides obsessing over ice sculptures. But for every one of those you can find plenty of young people waiting tables to put themselves through college or waking before dawn to get to the construction site or the firehouse.

If it's anecdote that tells the story, consider this: In 1974, I graduated from college. I'd paid my own way the last two years with jobs as a resident assistant and a newspaper summer intern. I rented a small, cheap one-bedroom apartment in lower Manhattan and started work as a reporter. I still have the Royal typewriter I used to write my stories.

Only a fool would think that experience had any resonance for the class of 2006. To earn the money to pay for a year at a fine liberal-arts college today, a student would have to have a summer job robbing banks. There are no cheap one-bedroom apartments in lower Manhattan. In fact, the monthly rent today on my former apartment is probably about the same as my total annual tuition was in 1974. And the use of computers means that when these students begin working, they are essentially at the office every hour of every day.

What lesson have they learned from watching their parents leave for the office early, come home late, check e-mail at midnight? If they've seen their elders laid off from a company to which they'd given the best years of their lives, young people may have concluded that loyalty to the corporation is a historical artifact. If they've watched marriages buckle and work tasks displace family time, they may vow to find jobs that accommodate their own kids. If they've been listening to the drumbeat of burnout, downsizing and stress, the tom-tom of modern existence, maybe they've decided that they intend to try to have a life as well as a work life. I, for one, can't argue. My father traveled constantly on business. Is it coincidence that I've somehow finagled a job that allows me to work at home?

An executive at a group that looks at law firms said recently that the rate of attrition among young lawyers at big firms is now greater than ever before. Some newly minted attorneys wanted more of a sense of serving the public weal than a corporate practice provides. This makes sense because the

younger generation in this country has done more volunteer work than any other in history. When you're watching girls gone wild in Cancún, don't forget kids gone philanthropic in New Orleans, where some students spent spring break helping out post-Katrina.

But many associates just don't value the life of a big-firm drone, which in countless articles and books has been portrayed as a cross between being an indentured servant and a prisoner of war. Sure, the money's great. But maybe this younger generation is populated by those who are willing (or able) to trade slightly less money for slightly more contentment. I'm part of the generation that said it wanted to change the world, and it did. We let the 40-hour workweek morph into the 60-hour workweek and even the 80-hour workweek.

Senator Clinton was jolted out of the codger cul-de-sac by a well-placed, highly educated source: her daughter, Chelsea, who is 26, and who reprimanded her mother with this news flash: "I work hard. My friends work hard." The mystery is why Hillary didn't run her ham-handed remarks past Chelsea before she pandered to a Chamber of Commerce audience with stale old stereotypes, and why more of us don't listen to what our kids say about what they've learned from our mistakes. If the experience of their exhausted, insomniac, dispirited elders makes them decide they'd prefer not to go straight from the classroom to the cubicle to the coffin, it doesn't mean they're lazy. It means they're sane.

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