Serving Faithfully

As a central precept of their lives moving forward, these boomers follow their faith into service to others. Through service, they create value to their communities, their peers, and to themselves.

The basic conflict: Serving others vs. personal identity

Boomers are brought to a point where, driven by their faith and as part of the identity-defining process, they devote themselves to the service of others. Whether that identity involves being a good Christian, a good neighbor, or simply a good human, it drives these individuals to seek fulfillment. As they reflect on their lives, they sometimes recognize lapses of faith or lack of trust as the key elements that motivate the decisions of these boomers. Some feel sufficiently Department to find meaning in the service of others, while others are driven to engage with people in need. Regardless, they are in transition from a focus on “getting by” to an outward dedication to helping others. Their new missions express and define their faith in themselves, in God or the divine, in their communities, and in their futures.

Lifestyle: A time to serve

These boomers are diverse, coming from diverse backgrounds and identities, but they are moving into a life stage defined by a time of service. They’ve earned their keep, and made it to a point where the value of material things pales in comparison to the satisfaction provided by helping others. This life stage emerged from several very different expressions of it in people’s lives: some as expected life stages, some as surprises, and some as flexible improvisations for survival through unexpected circumstances. Together they represent the results of faith-based decision making on dramatic transitions in individuals’ lives.

One striking expression of this type is that of a distinct and expected Christian life stage: these boomers see service to humanity as the appropriate and desirable pursuit after long and stable working lives. It’s their time to give back and help those who have less, regardless of how much they themselves have. This message resonates with narratives about volunteering in retirement, and the role of caring for elders is a key element that motivates the decisions of these boomers. Some know definitively what community they serve, while others still struggle to align their abilities with people in need. Regardless, they are all in transition from a focus on “getting by” to an outward dedication to helping others.

Expectations: Doing unto others

These boomers court the values of reciprocity and the overarching support of civic, ethical, and spiritual authorities. It is self-evident that social services will be needed in greater volume, with greater commitment in the future, and they see contributing roles for themselves that will satisfy needs for their communities, their peers, and themselves. As they serve elders and youth in their communities, they project into their current efforts the future of their own aging, and the changes in society at large. They know that they and their peers will need support and feel compelled to fill those roles. By getting involved, the possibility of civic resources in the coming decades will become an opportunity to build new relationships with better-off peers and with younger cohorts in their communities.

Boomers serving faithfully to others what they hope, in time, will be done for them. They aim to create the conditions for a peer-supporting community and society, based on reciprocity, reputation, and standing faith. The sides and neighborhoods they develop now will frame the values of communities and neighborhoods in which they will age.
The Action Ecology illustrates the complexity with which boomers anticipate, plan for, and deal with changes in their lives. The inner portion of the ecology highlights resources, sorted into four categories: people, information, institutions, and capitals. The outer ring, organized around our seven dimensions of decision making, describe practices and strategies through which boomers put their resources into action. Finally, there are the “decisions in suspension,” questions that these boomers don’t have answers to just yet.

**DECISIONS IN SUSPENSION:**
- When is the right time for service?
- What is the most useful and rewarding way to serve?
- Whether one can afford to move?
- Whether to supplement income and benefits with wage work?

**Extended Capacity**
- An identity shift
  - Adapting the self
    - Serving aging parents
  - Changing surroundings
    - Repairing homes and businesses
  - Strengthening local infrastructure

**Engaging the Narrative**
- Enacting the narrative
  - Volunteering in retirement
    - Focusing on others instead of the self
  - Serving aging parents
- Authoring one’s path
  - Choosing an early retirement
    - Defining social entrepreneurship

**Re-Institutioning**
- Creating the community
  - Re-institutioning the old
    - Building community centers and colleges
  - Perpetuating non-profit groups
    - Helping new faith in civic governance

**New Sociology**
- Payment and reciprocity

**Wealth Generation**
- Cultivating faith
  - Postponing the search for wage work or full-time employment
  - Praying plans will come together
  - Consulting psychics and astrologers for financial and real estate decisions
- Caring for elders and peers
  - Joining community organizations

**Global Transparency**
- Building capacities
  - Focusing on the local
    - Building local health capacities
  - Refitting neighborhood buildings and open spaces
  - Creating art to a neighborhood

**Self-Help 2.0**
- Support for now and later
  - Creating new service and learning centers in the community

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The Dimensions of Decision Making

The boomers we talked to helped us discover the key dimensions of the seven big stories that emerge at the intersection of aging, cohort, and period effects. For each story, we found a pair of defining actions—two poles of behavior that turn the stories into scales. We then used these scales to define the action types, each of which represents a unique profile.

### Extended Capacity

- **Adapting to self**
- **Changing surroundings**

On one hand, devoting themselves to service requires that these boomers accept simplicity and be satisfied with fewer financial resources but increased spiritual satisfaction. This adaptation is an emotional one. At the same time, these boomers define and change their surroundings by what of their contributions.

### Resequencing Life Stages

- **Evolving consumer**
- **Authoring one’s path**

Some of these boomers are following narratives that dictate service to others as the next appropriate life stage for them to enter. Others choose to pursue service in clarifying ways, choosing to position themselves outside mainstream expectations. Still others pursue service as a way to deal with disruptive life events, authoring their way out of familiar narratives.

### Self-Help 2.0

- **Expressing relationships**
- **Investing in the new**

Essentially, boomers serving faithfully help themselves age well by connecting to others and achieving citizenship in local settings. The effective value they find in serving others in the near term will translate over the coming decades to more rugged hardship and communities that will be more supportive as boomers age.

### Re-Institutioning

- **Building the instrumental network**
- **Mitigating risk by constructing the legal**

These boomers learn about opportunities and connect to communities through their networks and see themselves rooted in networks that other people can identify for support and service. Building networks is an essential activity for their continuing ability to care for themselves and others. Since helping others is so ingrained in their senses of self, their relationships are essential to their identities.

### New Sociability

- **Building the social consumer**
- **Cultivating faith**

While some boomers serving faithfully will strike out to build their own institutions, most will work to renew the vitality of long-established ones. They seek or have already found the right church, neighborhood group, or non-profit organization that fill their needs. Their dedication, in turn, creates new value for the institutions.

### Wealth Generation

- **Focusing on the local**
- **Engaging with the global**

These boomers believe strongly that everything will come together in the end. Over time, patience, and persistence, they believe that their prayers will be answered, their time will align, their visions and careers will flourish, and their communities will come together. They don’t hedge the future; they dream for it. They remain focused on the value they contribute in the present.

### Global Transparency

- **Engaging with the global**
- **Repurposing the old**

The strongest articulations of this action type will function primarily on a local level: the neighborhood will be the most striking place we’ll see the effects of their actions. However, some of these boomers are cultivating networks and commitments that will thrust their service onto an international stage.
Profiles & Quotations

Each of these profiles describes a person who embodies the Serving Faithfully action type. These three personal stories best illustrate the decision-making lens of the action type but are not the only interviewees who shaped the type. The profiles represent actual people and their words, although their names and some details about their lives have been changed to protect their identities.

After 40 years of working (and within days of our interview), Loretta Brown retired as an operations manager at a country transportation bureau in a West Coast city. She had kept her job, with its offices in the inner city, even after taking a leap of faith to buy a house in a distant exo-burb at her psychic sister’s urging. Her service does not end with retirement; if anything, it heralds an intensification of the music-related church and community activities that have consumed her evenings and weekends for decades. She has also started applying her managerial skills to the music business of her two grown sons, supplementing her retirement plan and allowing her to travel to New Jersey to care for her ailing father and sister.

She feels like she “has it all” right now, and is looking for ways to spend her time that will contribute to this feeling of satisfaction, and that are consistent with her strong Christian identity.

On the many functions of a single charity:

“I am a part of a singing organization, and we meet monthly. We have meetings. We have concerts. We sponsor a charity. We sponsor a block party every year with a health fair. And we do fingerprinting along with blood pressure screening, that kind of thing. We also sponsor a festival area, so we try and raise money again, for our charity. We do what we call our singathons, where we bring the groups and choirs together, again, to raise money for our charity. People from my church are also involved in the singing organization. And there’s sort of an interweaving in the same circle.”

On the importance of health and relationships:

“I think I’ve gotten to a point where if you have your health, you have peace of mind. And you have people who love you, people that you love. It’s really the most important thing, and material things are not that important.”

On reciprocity:

“to know that in your lifetime you’ve touched someone, or that in your lifetime you’ve helped someone work out a problem that they thought they couldn’t solve—those are things that make life worth living, you know? ... I think that’s the going that makes you feel good about yourself, and that you’ve actually done something, and you’ve given something of yourself that makes someone else’s life better.”

Loretta Brown

Age: 60

Suburban West Coast

Dorothy Maloney

Age: 54

Rural East Coast

Dorothy Maloney lives alone after decades of affiliation and long years of residence with a spiritual commune, whose members she refers to as her “family.” While she does not believe in the need to maintain a service business and live simply, her controllable uprooting allowed her to focus on developing mental, physical, emotionally and spiritually dense living in college. A recent consultation with an astrologer confirmed the hope for re-directing herself towards serving others, and gave her a lifetime in which to do so.

Dorothy follows a rigid regimen of controlled diet, herbal supplements, and meditation to heal and sustain her body and mind, but only to the degree she needs to “serve.”

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On purpose in work: “I’ve found work … that can be a vehicle for me. I can actually say that I have something to offer, that I know something that would be useful to people.”

On the future: “I do have to say that I’m grateful that if we still have money, I most likely will get some inheritance that would keep me. I mean, it’s not huge, but, you know, even like $500,000 or something really would just be a support while I continue this work, so it’s not like I’m going to have to be house cleaning, you know, for the rest of my life. So I feel I want to use this as a support plan, in a sense.”

Kenneth Ikeda ambiguously identifies himself as both retired and self-employed. Five years ago, he was laid off from the latest in a series of factory and warehouse jobs, each of which he had expected to hold for the rest of his life. There is still a window for him to return to work, but that is the least preferable situation for him. He has been working as a handyman, caretaker, and driver for elders, friends, business people, and community groups in the neighborhood for under-the-table cash. Jobs just “fall into his lap,” and he “believes it will keep coming that way.” He is grateful that his wife, a public servant, is still employed, and that though their four grown children live with them, they are self-sufficient. He derives immense satisfaction from his odd jobs in the community and says that the biggest change is in himself: he is more relaxed, happier, and more content with less money. While he is diabetic, he feels the pills his doctor has given him keep things in check, and he eats rice and pizza, and drinks diet soda as he pleases.

On what’s important: “In that ten-year period, I felt like I worked, maybe, 20 years. So when I got laid off in 2002, you know, I started thinking about what’s important. You know, everyone, when they grow up, they’re always money. Money is what you need to survive, you need it for your kids and stuff, but it’s not like it’s the biggest thing. You can make ends meet, you can have a roof over your head, you can have food, but other than that, it’s not like it’s the biggest thing. So when I got laid off, I started thinking about: ‘Gee. Maybe I should take a different approach.’ And it was less money is better.”

On staying put: “We’re going to spend the rest of our lives here … And we’re happy. We have good neighbors.”

Kenneth Ikeda
Agate: 54
Suburban Northwest
Source: flickr.com/irish.typepad

On helping one another: “Well, like I was saying earlier, my father was a giving person, always willing to help neighbors, cousins, family—I mean, anybody. You need help, he was there for you. So when friends and neighbors ask me for help maybe fixing something, even if it’s nothing, I’m willing to help, and I get satisfaction in helping people. And I think that’s the way the world should be, you know, to help one another, and don’t expect anything in return.”

On serving as his community ages: “I enjoy working with people, talking with people. And I feel like I’m spending this time in a way that’s very useful to me. And I’m not going to do part-time work. I’m trying to work as much as I can. And I think that is useful. I think it’s good for me, personally, in a variety of ways.”

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Decisions in Context

At a glance:

- **Work:** Idealism and practicality
  - These boomers are willing to work for less, even volunteer, to cultivate the faith and meaning that has become central to their lives.
- **Faith:** Faith in the guru, the garden, and the general practitioner
  - Food habits and choices made by these boomers are guided again by faith—in this case, a faith in trusted authorities.
- **Housing:** Roots in place and leaps of faith
  - These boomers are deeply defined by their homes and neighborhoods.
- **Finances:** Balance and support
  - These boomers are aware of their financial state, and seek ways to balance financial support and service.
- **Health:** Keeping the community healthy
  - Health is a central medium around which they organize social interaction and social service.

**Work:**

These boomers are willing to work for less, even volunteer, to cultivate the faith and meaning that has become central to their lives. For the most part, they are not focused on increasing their income, rising or consolidating positions in hierarchies, or building public-facing roles. They view, however, building reputations, and through their work are becoming leaders in their communities, which can be either more or less venerable or walled, or who pursue a more direct route of the greater good. The element of reputation is one way that their decisions about work, which at first glance seems idealistic, return to practicality. Their labors generate support, but not necessarily in a medium of money. These boomers can be found in the ranks of those retiring, voluntarily or involuntarily, and ardently defining retirement as something other than luxury or idleness.

**Faith:**

Faith in the guru, the garden, and the general practitioner

Food habits and choices made by these boomers are guided again by faith—in this case, a faith in trusted authorities. Who these authorities are differs widely, manifesting in a great diversity of food practices among our participants. For some, their faith is vested in gurus, leading to dedicated adherence to prescribed alternative diets. For others, traditional doctors or conventional pharmaceuticals absolve these boomers of some restrictions while posing others for them to follow. Still others place their faith in family wisdom, cultivating gardens, kitchens, and diets rooted in heritage and tradition. And another group remains confident that their ethical pursuits in eating will reflect their service onto the wider world. Once their appropriate prescription is found, they will follow it persistently.

**Housing:**

Roots in place and leaps of faith

These boomers are deeply defined by their home and neighborhoods. Many cannot afford to move, and their service revolves around the places that have become central to their lives. While some would like to move more to other opportunities, they are driven not by calculations around how to maintain their own lifestyles, but by a search for the communities to which they can add the most value. In either case, actual decisions will be made as leaps of faith where they trust that different elements will resolve into a cohesive whole. They have great patience in waiting for this resolution: markets shift and communities change, but they will wait for the signals of their faith—the key practices, faith-based solutions, prayer or intuition—to tell them that the time is right.

**Finances:**

Balance and support

These boomers are aware of their financial state, and seek ways to balance financial support and service. While it is important to note that they are not necessarily well off, they do have some form of support, if not stability, often through spouses who are employed full-time, pensions from past work lives, or inheritances. They are not comfortable financial decision makers, and embed themselves in relationships with partners, community members, parents, and children who are more comfortable with the tools and language of risk mitigation. When thrust into a position of making financial decisions, they approach it like housing and work, as a leap of faith on the advice of longstanding advisors and social networks.

**Health:**

Keeping the community healthy

Health is a central medium around which they organize social interaction and social service. These boomers serve for the health of their communities, engaging with the health care of their friends and neighbors by volunteering for public health outreach, training, or education; or providing support and mentorship to their neighbors. They may be focused on shifting the health practices and values of their communities, or on shifting their own practices to align with those around them. At the same time, their visions of service are fast rooted in their own continued good health, a trust that their labors and support will then result in the health of their communities.