

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.

Diverse life paths have brought these boomers 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 means being a good Christian, a good neighbor, or simply a good human, it drives these boomers to find communities they can improve with their skills and their time. These motivations sometimes require leaps of faith; in fact, faith and trust are the key elements that motivate 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. Their new missions express and define their faith in themselves, in God or the divine, in their communities, and in their futures.

The basic conflict:

Serving others vs. personal identity

Through reaching outward to help others, these boomers create value for themselves and for their communities. Their sense of obligation to others in this mode subtly conflicts with their sensitivity to their own identities and value as individuals. They seek relationships that they have not experienced or emphasized in their lives so far, creating experiences that strengthen or test their faith in the way that the world works. The concrete services they render unto others have value, but those actions also provide personal sources of meaning, experience, and purpose. Reflected in their goals, emotions, and even bodies, purpose lies at the cores of their new senses of self.

Lifestage:

A time to serve

These boomers come from diverse backgrounds and motivations, but they are all 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 action type 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. While this resonates with narratives about volunteering in retirement, other boomers feel their paths are different from the Christian narrative. For these boomers, the life stage of service is a response to an inner calling, where loss of work leads them to this new period of meaning, simplicity, and contribution.

Expectations:

Doing unto others

These boomers count on the values of reciprocity and the overarching support of civic, medical, 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 community, 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 instability 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 do unto 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 abiding faith. The skills and endeavors they develop now will frame the values of communities and neighborhoods in which they will age.



Action Ecology:

Serving Faithfully

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?

Global Transparency

Building capacities

FOCUSING ON THE LOCAL

- Building local health capacities
- Refitting neighborhood buildings and open spaces
- Orienting oneself to a neighborhood

ENGAGING WITH THE GLOBAL

- Traveling to help develop sustainable communities abroad
- Serving a community that crosses geographic boundaries

Extended Capacity

An identity shift

ADAPTING THE SELF

- Lowering material expectations
- Shifting identity towards service goals

CHANGING SURROUNDINGS

- Repairing homes and businesses
- Strengthening local infrastructure

Resequencing Life Stages

A time to serve

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

Self-Help 2.0

Support for now and later

BECOMING A CONNECTED CITIZEN

- Supporting charity programs
- Encouraging coordination in government programs
- Caring for elders and peers
- Joining community organizations

Wealth Generation

Abiding faith

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
- Counting on one's body to hold out



PEOPLE

Neighbors
Family members
Community members
Spiritual families
Supportive partners



INFORMATION

Service-oriented
Web sites
Word of mouth
Bulletin boards
Trusted friends

Resources



CAPITALS

Community networks
Spiritual capital
State pensions & retirement funds
Lifelong skills



INSTITUTIONS

Churches and church groups
Communes
State programs
Parent's care providers
Community centers

Re-Institutioning

Creating the community

REPURPOSING THE OLD

- Re-dedicating spiritual institutions to anti-poverty efforts
- Using community centers and colleges to make contacts
- Reinvigorating non-profit groups
- Having more faith in local governance

INVESTING IN THE NEW

- Creating new service and learning centers in the community

New Sociability

Payment and reciprocity

BUILDING THE INSTRUMENTAL NETWORK

- Looking for paid service through neighbors and friends
- Accepting reciprocal service from others

EXPRESSING RELATIONSHIPS

- Finding identity in a spiritual or local community

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



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 virtue of their contributions.

Resequencing Life Stages



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 idiosyncratic ways, choosing to position themselves outside mainstream expectations. Still others use service as a way to deal with disruptive life events, authoring their way out of familiar narratives.

Self-Help 2.0



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

New Sociability



These boomers learn about opportunities and connect to communities through their networks and are themselves nodes 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.

Re-Institutioning



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 fulfills their needs. Their dedication, in turn, creates new value for the institutions.

Wealth Generation



These boomers believe strongly that everything will come together in the end. Given time, patience, and persistence, they believe that their prayers will be answered, their stars will align, their visions will come to fruition, 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



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.

Loretta Brown

Age: 60
Suburban West Coast

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 a fingerprint thing for the kids, and we do health screening, blood pressure screening, that kind of thing. We also sponsor a fashion show, so we try and raise money, again, for our charity. We do what we call choir meetings, 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, although they're not members ... So it's all sort of networking 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 that 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 it's the giving 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 day."



Source: flickr.com/pixiduc

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 now makes a living with a small domestic service business and lives simply, her comfortable upbringing allowed her to focus on developing herself physically, emotionally and spiritually since leaving college. A recent consultation with an astrologer confirmed her hope for re-orienting herself towards serving others, and gave her a timeline in which to do so. Having divined what she feels she can contribute to "the greatest good," with the help of other members of her spiritual family, she seeks the right communities and populations to serve. 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 be "useful."



Source: IFTF

Kenneth Okeda

Age: 54

Suburban Northwest

On individual offerings:

“To actually take responsibility and not just say, ‘Okay, yeah. I’m a serving person,’ or, ‘I’ll follow this person or that,’ or, ‘I’ll just be involved in this activity with these people’ ... It’s saying, ‘Okay, so what can I offer, and let me make sure that I’m doing that—what’s unique to me?’”

On purpose in work:

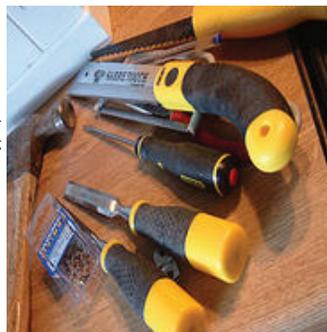
“I’ve found work ... that can be a vehicle for me. I can actually say that I have something to offer, that I know something that would be useful to people.”

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, or doing something else that I don’t want to. I mean, I’d really like to be able to center. So, that’s a kind of retirement plan, in a sense.”

Kenneth Ikeda ambivalently 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 his 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.

Source: flickr.com/irish typepad



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, I think everyone, when they grow up, it’s always money. Make as much as you can, you know. But I’ve learned that no matter how much money you make, you’re never happy. You’re never satisfied. And you’re too tired to spend it ... So when I got laid off, I started thinking more about: ‘Gee. Maybe I should take a different approach.’ Maybe less money is better.”

On serving as his community ages:

“I enjoy working with people, talking with people. And I feel like I’m servicing the elderly people because, essentially, I’m going to do yard work or handyman work or take care of my elderly neighbors. They’re all elderly ... In 20 years, all the elderly would be maybe more my age, so my clients would be people my age.”

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 to help you. So when friends and neighbors ask for help maybe fixing something, yeah, I’ll help them. If something breaks, and they come over, I’ll help them fix it. I get satisfaction in helping people, I guess. 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 staying put:

“We’re going to spend the rest of our lives here ... And we’re happy. We have good neighbors, good neighborhood.”

Decisions in Context

At a glance:

Boomers who are serving faithfully find that their decisions are guided overwhelmingly by faith: faith in God or the divine, faith in trusted authorities, faith in themselves, and faith in their communities.

Work:

Idealism and practicality

These boomers are willing to work for less, or 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 are, however, building reputations, and through their work are becoming known in their communities as people who serve those who are vulnerable or in need, or who pursue a more abstract notion of the greater good. This element of reputation is one way that their decisions about work, which at first glance seem 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.

Housing:

Roots in place and leaps of faith

These boomers are deeply defined by their homes and neighborhoods. Many cannot afford to move, and their service revolves around bettering the place that will nurture them for the rest of their lives. While some wrestle with the decision to move, 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—be they psychics, faith-based advisors, prayer or intuition—to tell them that the time is right.

Food:

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.

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: a leap of faith on the advice of longstanding advisors and sound 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 as nurses later in life, or providing transportation to medical services for 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 built around a faith in their own continued good health, a trust that their bodies will support their mission to be pillars of their communities.