Pendulum
Pendulum

Where We’ve Been, How We Got There, Where We’re Headed

Roy H. Williams and Michael R. Drew
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If you will see into the heart of a people, look closely at what they create. Examine the inventions to which they pay the most attention. Read their best-selling books. Listen to their popular music. This is how you will know them.

—Roy H. Williams

Having made my ninety-minute presentation on “Society’s Forty-Year Pendulum” to over 240 auditoriums full of people in the past eight years, I began this book by trying to disprove my own “forty-year” hypothesis.

My friend Dr. Kary Mullis, winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize in Chemistry, said,

Roy, there are few true scientists left in the world. Too often a scientist will develop a hypothesis and then look for supporting evidence. They identify with their hypothesis, and they want it to be correct. This is bad science. When you have a hypothesis, your job is to try to disprove it. No one knows more about your hypothesis than you do. No one else is as qualified to discover its flaws. When you believe a thing to be true, your first responsibility is to do everything you can to disprove it.

As I attacked my hypothesis to disprove it, I found three major loopholes:
1. I had chosen the examples in my presentation after I developed my theory.

2. My presentation was US-centric. I was using the *Billboard* charts to follow patterns in music and the *New York Times* Best Sellers List to follow patterns in literature.

3. All my examples came from the past 120 years. My original motive in this was that my audience needed to be familiar with the events. But if my forty-year hypothesis was true, it should be observable in any century.

With Kary’s voice ringing in my head, I decided to

A. throw out all the familiar data in my ninety-minute presentation;
B. begin a new investigation using completely new data, whose patterns and connections I would have no way of knowing in advance;
C. gather this new data from persons who had never seen my presentation;
D. use the international hit-tracking website TsorT instead of *Billboard*;
E. use the *Publishers Weekly* list instead of the *New York Times*;
F. examine every forty-year window in the past three thousand years; and
G. use a single source, Wikipedia, for establishing the dates of events in question.

This book is the result of that investigation.

Note: The careful reader will notice a number of sentence fragments, lists and short passages taken directly from Wikipedia and TsorT. The authors wish to acknowledge our debt to the worldwide teams of
unnamed experts who have graciously contributed their time and expertise to these marvelous online endeavors. Thank you.

Due to the fact that each of these databases is updated daily with new information, it is inevitable that some of the dates will change and the song rankings will be altered. When this occurs, we hope you will retest our hypothesis against the new facts as they are presented and judge for yourself whether our thesis remains reliable.

—Roy H. Williams and Michael Drew
Introduction

You’ve seen the public redefine what is acceptable and what is not. But by what process do we choose the new rules? It feels as though the earth is shifting beneath our feet.

Having made my living for thirty years as an advertising consultant to small business owners nationwide, I’ve heard thousands of them practically sing in chorus, “Ads that worked well in the past aren’t working anymore. What should we do now? What happens next? Where do we go from here?”

The questions I needed to answer for them were: *What are the forces that drive the decisions of the public? What makes people do the things they do?*

Journey with Michael Drew and me as we examine the predictable, rhythmic attractions that move a society from one extreme to another. Together we’ll examine where we’ve been and how we got there. When we get back to where we started, you’ll know where society is headed and understand the forces that move us like flotsam on the tide. You’ll know exactly how to get in step with the public’s expectations.

Not only that, you’ll be able to stay a step ahead of them. The new rules of success will be clear to you.

Predictable, rhythmic attractions are what move our society. Rhythm is intrinsic to the human experience. Feet patter, hearts beat, lungs breathe, planets circle, and seasons cycle to a rhythm. Music, poetry, and dance are built upon it.

The yearnings of the heart are cyclical as well. We are rhythmically pulled toward one hunger and away from another. Back and
forth we travel, forever dissatisfied, because the hardest choices in life are those that are between two good things. But we don’t move between these poles as individuals; we move collectively, as a society. Solomon observed these endless cycles three thousand years ago and wrote,

*What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, ‘Look! This is something new’? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.*

—Ecclesiastes 1:9–11

As you read this book, you’ll recall those words of Solomon and think, *How very right he was!* If only we could learn to examine the experiences of former generations, perhaps we could learn how to avoid taking good things too far.
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*Search for a Rosetta Stone that will give you a window into the minds of these barbarians at the gate, so that in the future at least you’ll know how to do business with them.*
Search for a Rosetta Stone that will give you a window into the minds of these barbarians at the gate, so that in the future at least you’ll know how to do business with them.

“Nick, we just finished 1963 all over again, but this time we’re headed in the opposite direction.”

“What do you mean, exactly?”

It was late November 2003. I was talking to my friend Dr. Richard D. Grant, a psychologist and teacher of Consumer Behavior in the MBA program at the University of Texas in Austin. Like many people, I ponder the events of the year each autumn and try to make sense of it all. In the fall of 2003 I had a nagging sense of déjà vu.

In 1991, twelve years prior to my strange “1963 all over again” proclamation, I had read *The Popcorn Report*, in which Faith Popcorn suggested, “A trend is a fad that lasts at least ten years.” As those next ten years progressed, the accuracy of her predictions continued to amaze me.

Faith Popcorn’s forecasts evolved exactly as she said they would. When you read *The Popcorn Report* today, her predictions seem fairly obvious. This is due to what Harvard Business School calls “The Curse of Knowledge”—you can’t imagine not knowing what you know. But if you had read that book in 1991 as I did, those predictions were gutsy, audacious, and profoundly insightful.

In one of her closing chapters Ms. Popcorn very presciently describes what we now know as e-mail and e-commerce, though she called them *ScreenMail* and *InfoBuying* even though neither had yet
been invented. When she coined those words, the average American was completely unaware of connectivity. *World Wide Web* and *Internet* were terms that were not yet in the common lexicon. It would be another two years before the average person would begin hearing rumblings about a soon-to-come “Information Superhighway.”¹ Even the most forward-thinking technologists weren’t anticipating search engines. In the minds of most people Faith’s claims of ScreenMail and InfoBuying made her sound like a raving nut.

But she was right. I saw these things come to pass. You did too.

Solomon’s writings in Ecclesiastes and the accuracy of Faith Popcorn’s predictions caused me to become sensitive to patterns of events over long periods of time, leading finally to my own November 2003 realization of society’s forty-year Pendulum.

When I explained my theory to Dr. Grant, he pointed me to *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069* by William Strauss and Neil Howe.² That book gave me the data that showed me I was on solid ground.

Strauss and Howe described four “generations,” each of which lasts about twenty years. The pattern is:

1. Idealist, followed by
2. Reactive, followed by
3. Civic, followed by
4. Adaptive, then back to Idealist.

However, I was deeply frustrated as I read *Generations* because I didn’t see four generations of twenty years each, as Strauss and Howe did. I saw two generations of forty years each. Finally, a few hundred
pages into the book, Strauss and Howe described the Idealist and the Civic generations as *dominant* and the Reactive and Adaptive generations as *recessive*.

That was the moment I began to stitch our two theories together: *the “dominant” twenty-year periods mark the upswing of a pendulum and the “recessive” twenty-year periods mark its downswing, as the values that pushed the pendulum upward begin to run out of steam.*

Society hungers for individuality and freedom during the upswing of a “Me”—nothing wrong with that. But we always take a good thing too far. What begins as a beautiful dream of self-discovery (1963) ends as hollow, phony posing (1983). And then from the heady heights of those glittering disco lights, our desires drift quietly back to earth, feather-like, toward what we left behind: working together for the common good.

Two weeks later I sent the following “Monday Morning Memo” to fourteen thousand subscribers:
1963 All Over Again

December 15, 2003: We’re about to finish 1963 for the second time.

Forty years is how long a true “generation” stays in power, during which time social change will be evolutionary, rather than revolutionary. But in the waning years of each generation, “Alpha Voices” ring out as prophets in the wilderness, providing a glimpse of the new generation that will soon emerge like a baby chick struggling to break out of its shell.

Prior to 1963 Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* were the Alpha Voices that gave us a glimpse of the emerging Baby Boomers. The musical Alphas that rang out five years later (1958) were Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley. Then, at the tipping point—1963—we encountered the Beatles followed by the Rolling Stones and the world began rapidly changing stripe and color. The passing of the torch from the duty-bound WWII generation into the hands of the “Do-Your-Own-Thing” Baby Boomers was officially under-way.

AOL and Google are the Kerouac and Salinger of the new generation that will soon pry the torch from the hands of boomers reluctant to let it go. Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley have become Tupac Shakur and Eminem, and the Baby Boomers’ reaction to them is much like their own parents’ reaction to Chuck and Elvis. But instead of saying, “Take a bath, cut your hair, and get a job,” we’re saying, “Pull those pants up, spin that cap around, and wash your mouth out with soap.”

At the peak of the baby boom there were seventy-four million teenagers in America, and radio carried a generation on its shoulders. Today there are seventy-two million teenagers who are about to take over the world. Do you understand what fuels their passions? Can you see the technological bonds that bind them?
Baby-Boomer heroes were always bigger than life, perfect icons, brash and beautiful: Muhammad Ali, Elvis, James Bond. But the emerging generation holds a different view of what makes a hero.

Boomers rejected conformity, and their attitude swept the land, changing even the mores of their fuddy-duddy parents. But today’s teens are rejecting pretense. Born into a world of hype, their internal BS meters are highly sensitive and blisteringly accurate. Words like amazing, astounding, and spectacular are translated as “blah,” “blah,” and “blah.” Consequently, tried-and-true selling methods that worked as recently as a year ago are working far less well today. Trust me, I know. The world is again changing stripe and color. We’re at another tipping point. Can you feel it?

No one on earth could read Egyptian hieroglyphics until Napoleon Bonaparte discovered the Rosetta Stone in 1799. That stone—nearly four feet tall—told the same story in three different languages. Two of those languages we could read. The third language was hieroglyphics. Armed with insights gained from studying the Rosetta Stone, the wealth of a whole society, ancient Egypt, became available to those who took the time to learn the strange, new language.

If you are concerned about the changes that you see happening all around you, there are basically two things you can do:

1. Pretend that it won’t affect your business. (Let me know how this works out for you.)
2. Search for a Rosetta Stone that will give you a window into the minds of these barbarians at the gate so that in the future at least you’ll know how to do business with them.

*If you choose option number two, I believe you’ll find the movie 8 Mile starring Eminem, playing himself, to be a pretty good place to start.*

—Roy H. Williams

Should you choose to read Strauss and Howe’s *Generations*—and you should—you will notice that our books do not entirely agree. Having come at the same central idea from two different directions, it is reasonable that we should have two different perspectives. And because our book was written twenty years after theirs, Michael and I have had many more years to contemplate, speculate, and investigate this fascinating sociological phenomenon.

With regard to Solomon, Faith Popcorn, William Strauss, and Neil Howe, we can only echo the famous words of Isaac Newton, from a letter written to his friend Robert Hooke on February 5, 1675: *If I have seen further than other men, it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants.*
Thank you, Neil.
Thank you, William.
Thank you, Faith.
Thank you, Solomon.
You are our giants.

An ocean wave rolls onto the beach. Are you surprised when it rolls back out again? Neither should you be surprised when history repeats itself.
“Me” versus “We”

“Me” is the gravity of the Moon. “We” is the momentum of water.

The energies of a duality drive the Pendulum of public opinion. On one side is “Me,” the individual—unique, special, and possessing unlimited potential.

1. demands freedom of expression;
2. applauds personal liberty;
3. believes one man is wiser than a million men: “A camel is a racehorse designed by a committee”; 
4. wants to achieve a better life;
5. is about big dreams;
6. desires to be Number One: “I came, I saw, I conquered”; 
7. admires individual confidence and is attracted to decisive persons;
8. believes leadership is “Look at me. Admire me. Emulate me if you can”; and
9. strengthens a society’s sense of identity as it elevates attractive heroes.

On the other side is “We”—the group, the team, the tribe, the collective.

1. demands conformity for the common good;
2. applauds personal responsibility;
3. believes a million men are wiser than one man: “Two heads are better than one”;
4. wants to create a better world;
5. is about small actions;
6. desires to be a productive member of the team: “I came, I saw, I concurred”;
7. admires individual humility and is attracted to thoughtful persons;
8. believes leadership is “This is the problem as I see it. Please consider the things I am telling you and perhaps we can solve this problem together”; and
9. strengthens a society’s sense of purpose as it considers all its problems.

“Me” and “We” are the equal-but-opposite attractions that pull society’s Pendulum one way, then the other.
The twenty-year Upswing to the Zenith of “We” (e.g., 1923–1943) is followed by a twenty-year Downswing as that “We” cycle loses energy (e.g., 1943–1963). Society then begins a twenty-year Upswing into “Me” (e.g., 1963–1983), followed by a twenty-year Downswing as the “Me” cycle loses energy (1983–2003).

Think of the Pendulum as the forty-year heartbeat of society, systolic and diastolic. Contract and the Pendulum swings upward, relax and the Pendulum swings down again.

Although society gets legalistic and judgmental during a “We,” we do accomplish a lot of good things, such as raising the flag over Iwo Jima.

We let our hair down in a “Me” and become quite a mess because of it, but this gives us a particular joy—for example, Jimmy Buffett’s “Margaritaville.”

“We” and “Me”—it’s hard to choose between them.

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<th>“ME”</th>
<th>vs.</th>
<th>“WE”</th>
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<td><strong>Drivers of a “ME” versus drivers of a “WE”</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Demands freedom of expression.</td>
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<td>8. Believes leadership is “Look at me. Admire me. Emulate me if you can.”</td>
<td>8. Believes leadership is “This is the problem as I see it. Let’s solve it together.”</td>
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</table>
Yes, the hardest choices in life are the choices between two good things.

*And we always take good things too far.*

The beautiful “We” dream of *working together for the common good* gains momentum until it becomes duty, obligation, and sacrifice. What began in joy ends in bondage. This twenty-year Upswing on the “We” side of the Pendulum is what Strauss and Howe called the “civic” generation. The years 1923 to 1943 were just such a twenty-year Upswing.

Suffering the consequences of having taken a good thing too far, society begins to fall away from the extreme. The twenty-year Downswing of the “We” is what Strauss and Howe called the “adaptive” generation (e.g., 1943–1963).

The forty-year Pendulum is now back to its central position, the fulcrum, the tipping point halfway between Zeniths, ready to swing twenty years up to the opposite side as we take another good thing too far.

The beautiful “Me” dream of *individual expression,* “Do your own thing; march to the beat of a different drummer,” gains momentum and refinement until it finally becomes plastic, hollow, phony posing. What began in joy now ends in bondage. This twenty-year Upswing of “Me” is what Strauss and Howe called the “idealist” generation. The years 1963–1983 were just such a twenty-year Upswing.

Again suffering the consequences of having taken a good thing too far, society falls back once again from the extreme. The twenty-year Downswing of “Me” is what Strauss and Howe called the “reactive” generation. You and I called it Gen-X (e.g., 1983–2003).

**The Period of 2003–2023 Is Another Upswing of the Pendulum**

New York Times columnist David Brooks, writing about students graduating in May of 2011, said,

*Worst of all, they are sent off into this world with the whole baby-boomer theology ringing in their ears. If you sample some of the*
commencement addresses being broadcast on C-Span these days, you see that many graduates are told to: Follow your passion, chart your own course, march to the beat of your own drummer, follow your dreams, and find yourself. This is the litany of expressive individualism. But, of course, this mantra misleads on nearly every front.

Brooks further challenged this “Me” idea of finding yourself with a poignant observation:

Most people don’t form a self and then lead a life. They are called by a problem, and the self is constructed gradually by their calling.

Born in 1961, David Brooks is a baby boomer, if you cling to the idea of birth cohorts, but Brooks clearly understands the spirit of “We”: Find a problem and sacrifice yourself to solve it.

Finally, graduates are told to be independent-minded and to express their inner spirit. But, of course, doing your job well often means suppressing yourself. As Atul Gawande mentioned during his countercultural address last week at Harvard Medical School, being a good doctor often means being part of a team, following the rules of an institution, going down a regimented checklist.

Written in the ninth year of a “We” Upswing, Brooks ends this insightful column with the words, “The purpose in life is not to find yourself. It’s to lose yourself.” Society in a “Me” talks about big dreams and possibilities. But society in a “We” says, “Talk is cheap. Don’t tell me what you believe. Show me.”
Later in this book we’ll look at everything the current “We” Upswing has meant so far and make a few predictions about what is likely to happen in the future, but right now let’s establish a few definitions.

**Upswing of the Pendulum:** a window of time, approximately twenty years, when the prevailing set of values is gaining momentum in a society. (The “dominant” generations of Strauss and Howe: Idealist—“Me” and Civic—“We.”)

**Downswing of the Pendulum:** a window of time, approximately twenty years, when the prevailing set of values is losing momentum in a society. (The “recessive” generations of Strauss and Howe: Reactive—“Me” and Adaptive—“We.”)

**Halfway Up/Halfway Down:** the middle of any Upswing or Downswing, that point in time halfway between the fulcrum and the Zenith. The Pendulum is in the same position halfway down as when it is halfway up. Consequently, the outlook of society will be very much the same.

**EXAMPLE:** The year 1933 was halfway up a “We.” In contrast, the year 1953 was halfway down that same “We.” The attitudes of those years were very similar. Likewise, 1973 was halfway up a “Me,” and 1993 was halfway down that same “Me.” Again, the attitudes and music of those years were very similar.

Right now you might be thinking, “Upswing twenty years to the Zenith of ‘Me,’ then Downswing twenty years to the tipping point, then up twenty years to ‘We,’ then down twenty years to the tipping point would seem to indicate an eighty-year pattern rather than only forty years.” This is true, but transformational change happens during a window of just forty years, between one Zenith of the Pendulum and another. Consequently, a society becomes an entirely different people every forty years.

If this idea of becoming a new people every forty years puts an itch of memory in your brain, it’s probably because you’re remembering the story of Moses leading Israel through forty years of wandering in the wilderness.
We’re Going to Talk About That Later

An ocean wave rolls onto the beach. Are you surprised when it rolls back out again? Neither should you be surprised when history repeats itself. The gravity of the Moon creates the tides. The momentum of water creates the waves.

“Me” is the gravity of the Moon. “We” is the momentum of water.

You’ll also notice that we don’t name the sides of the Pendulum “left” and “right.” This is because these words harbor political associations of liberalism and conservatism. Assigning political parties to the sides of the Pendulum is a mistake. One might argue, “But conservatives fight for the rights of the entrepreneur, the individual ‘Me,’ whereas liberals fight for the benefit of the larger group—trade unions and the environment, the realm of the collective ‘We.’” But that’s just a single aspect of the conservative-liberal duality. A person might just as easily argue, “Liberals fight for the right of the individual woman, ‘Me,’ to choose. Conservatives fight for the beliefs of the prevailing religious group, the collective ‘We.’”

See how easy it would be to fall into a semantic debate? If you attempt to assign political beliefs to the swings of the Pendulum, you’ll become as confused as a termite in a yo-yo. Please resist the temptation.

Likewise, we don’t call the sides of the Pendulum “East” and “West” due to the cultural connotations of those words. This too would be a mistake. We’ve done insufficient research to make this statement conclusively, but it would appear that the Eastern and Western Pendulums are locked in opposite cycles. Western Europe, the Americas, and Australia are headed into a “We” just as China,
India, and the rest of Asia seem to be headed into a “Me.” In essence, China is experiencing the ’60s. Our 1963 happened for them in 2003.

The November 19, 2007, issue of Newsweek sports a colorful cover drawn in that style that was unique to the ’60s, and in the balloon letters of that era it reads,

1968:
The Year That Made Us Who We Are

China in 2008 was flexing its muscles in the glorious springtime that is the Upswing of every “We.” Think of the Beijing Olympics of 2008 as the Chinese version of our 1968. As we mentioned earlier, society strengthens its identity in a “Me” as it elevates attractive heroes.

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<td>Personal achievement becomes</td>
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<td>Rose-colored lenses becomes</td>
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In 2003, the year of the Western tipping point from the Downswing of “Me” (1983–2003) into the Upswing of our current “We,” I sent the following Monday Morning Memo to my few thousand subscribers around the world:
A Society and Its Heroes

Heroes are dangerous things. Bigger than life, highly exaggerated, and always positioned in the most favorable light, a hero is a beautiful lie.

Did George Washington really chop down a cherry tree and then confess to his father? Could Paul Bunyan really do the work of fifty men in a day? Does billionaire Bruce Wayne really risk his life to help the less fortunate around him?

We have historic heroes, folk heroes, and comic book heroes. We have heroes in books, in songs, in movies, and in sport. We have heroes of morality, leadership, kindness, and excellence. And nothing is so devastating to our sense of well-being as a badly fallen hero. Yes, heroes are dangerous things to have.

The only thing more dangerous is not to have them.

Heroes raise the bar we jump over and hold high the standards we live by. They are ever-present tattoos on our psyche, the embodiment of all we are striving to be.

We create our heroes from our hopes and dreams. And then they attempt to create us in their own image.

It’s funny when you think about it: We tell the lie of George Washington and the cherry tree to impress on our children the importance of honesty. We boast of the exploits of Paul Bunyan to communicate the beauty of productivity and the power of a work ethic. And really, wouldn’t the world be a better place if all its billionaires were as selfless as Bruce Wayne?
But as the romantic and misty-eyed Baby Boomers shuffle off the American stage, they’re being replaced by a clear-eyed generation who believes in “keepin’ it real,” saying always, “Take a good look, dog, ’cause you ain’t all that.”

So now we put our politicians under a microscope because we won’t accept less than the bitter truth. Could JFK have survived the scrutiny we imposed on poor Bill Clinton? The dysfunctional Malcolm in the Middle has replaced television’s idyllic John-Boy Walton, and a reality show has replaced Sunday night’s Wonderful World of Disney.

As we reject artificiality and hype, are we also killing off all our heroes?

Two hundred ninety-nine years ago, Andrew Fletcher understood the transforming power of heroes. In his 1704 speech from the floor of the Scottish Parliament, he pleaded for the creation of myths and legends to inspire the Scottish people, saying, “Who should make the laws of a nation? And we find that most of the ancient legislators thought they could not well reform the manners of any city without the help of a lyric, and sometimes of a dramatic poet.”

Yes, every hero is a beautiful lie.
But then so is every dream.
Until it becomes reality.

—Roy H. Williams