

# Preface

## NEAL GORENFLO

**About six months ago, a weather-beaten, middle-aged man** asked me for money on the platform of the Mountain View Caltrain station.

I gave him three dollars. He thanked me and asked what I did for work. I introduced myself and learned his name (Jeff), and we shook hands. I pulled a card from my computer bag and handed it to him as I told him that I publish an online magazine about sharing.

Jeff lit up, “Oh, I get that. When you’re homeless, it’s share or die.”

That got my attention, and I asked him to explain. Jeff said that a year earlier, his girlfriend had drunk herself to death alone in a motel room. He said she wouldn’t have died had someone been with her. For him, isolation meant death.

Jeff explained his perspective further: He has no problem giving his last dollar or cigarette to a friend; it comes back when you need it. But there are those who just take. You stay away from them.

I asked him about the homeless people in Mountain View, which is in the middle of prosperous Silicon Valley. Jeff said there are 800 homeless people in the city and that each has a similar story.

That conversation got under my skin. I shared it with Malcolm Harris the next day during a call about this book. Half-joking, I suggested Jeff’s phrase, “share or die,” as a title. At the time, I thought it was over the top. I wasn’t serious. But Malcolm began using it in correspondence about the book. It stuck.

My conversation with Jeff marked a turning point in my thinking. I had thought of sharing as merely smart because it creates positive social, environmental and economic change through one strategy.

But Jeff's story and the directness of his phrase—share or die—broke through my intellectualization of sharing. Jeff helped me see something that I was blind to, even though I knew all the facts—that sharing is not just a smart strategy; it's necessary for our survival as a species. This has always been so, but today our condition is especially acute—we're using 50 percent more natural resources per year than the earth can replace. And global population and per-capita consumption are growing. It's now glaringly obvious to me that we need to learn to share on a global scale—fast—or die.

But the threat is not only one of biological death. Those like me, who are in no danger of starving, face a spiritual death when we act as if well-being is a private affair, and gate ourselves off from the rest of humanity with money and property. We can neither survive nor live well unless we share. It's my outrageous hope that the young voices in this book will do for a generation what Jeff did for me—wake them to the idea that sharing can save them and the world.

# Foreword

## CORY DOCTOROW

**This was supposed to be the disconnected generation. Raised** on video games and networked communications, kept indoors by their parents' fear of predators and the erosion of public transit and public spaces, these were the kids who were supposed to be socially isolated, preferring the company of video-game sprites to their peers, preferring Facebook updates to real-life conversations.

The Internet's reputation for isolation is undeserved and one-dimensional. If the net makes it possible to choose to interact through an electronic remove from "the real world," it *also* affords the possibility of inhabiting the "real world" even when you've been shut away from it by your fearful parents or the tyranny of suburban geography.

Even as entertainment moguls were self-servingly declaring "Content is king," they failed to notice that content without an audience was about as interesting as a tree that falls in the deserted woods. Conversation is king, not content. If we gather around forums to talk about TV shows or movies or games or bands, it's because we enjoy talking with each other, because "social" is the best content there is. Content is just something to talk about. That's why the telecom industry—the industry that charges you to connect with other breathing humans—is 100 times larger than the entertainment industry.

Which is to say that our "disconnected" generation is more connected than any generation in history—connected via a huge, technologically augmented peripheral nervous system of communications technologies that gives them

continuous, low-level insight into their peers and the world they inhabit. Which is not to say that being wired up to the net's social radar is an unadulterated good: adding capacity and velocity to your nervous system can be a recipe for disaster, creating race conditions in which minor disagreements snowball into vicious fights, where the bad as well as the good can find itself magnified through positive feedback loops that ratchet minor stimuli into feedback screams. There's a downside to everything.

But let's look at the upside for a moment. Let's look at what connectedness means for people whose economic fortunes are in decline, a generation facing joblessness and a crashing dollar, a contracting economy and the austerity virus, which lays waste to our common institutions from libraries to subways, schools to community centers.

For that generation, connectedness is a way to coordinate, to work together to achieve goals, to substitute electronic connective tissue for wealth in the great race to *get stuff done*. Nearly a century after Nobel laureate Ronald Coase's seminal paper "The Theory of the Firm," it's clearer than ever that the better your organizational system, the more you can achieve. Market economies reward well-organized firms with wealth, but in Coase's world, money is mostly a way of scoring who gets the most done with the fewest meetings, memos and other forms of institutional overhead.

As the one percent Hoover up the world's fiat wealth, we're all faced with finding non-market ways of getting stuff done—housing ourselves, feeding ourselves, educating and entertaining ourselves. And that's where connectedness shines: the cheaper it is to get all your friends pulling in the same direction, the more you can get done for less money—whether that's founding a housing co-op or occupying the financial center of your city.

*Share or Die* isn't just a book about generosity or compassion; it's not just a repudiation of greed. The thread that runs through all these essays is the way that connectedness makes it *feasible* to share—feasible to seek out your ideological peers and collaborators, feasible to share the product of your collaboration with the world, feasible to turn your experience into a set of instructions for the next group to follow, refine and republish.

There's a lot of anger and disillusionment in this book, and there's some blind optimism and more than a little naïveté. But more than anything, this is a book of realistic hopefulness, a book that showcases creative, thoughtful people who are learning that there are alternative paths to happiness, that wealth is more than money, and that connectedness is at the core of community, no matter whether it comes through a virtual world, a social network or a face-to-face interaction.





# Introduction

## The Get Lost Generation

### MALCOLM HARRIS

**A**sk a headline writer at any paper of record and they'll tell you that today's young people are "the lost generation." They tend to use this label as if Hemingway and Fitzgerald hadn't stumbled their way through half the bars in Paris under the same flag. Unfortunately, the youth of today aren't lost in a morass of sex, art, booze and politics (not necessarily in that order), but rather can't find a path through the haze of economic insecurity and impending ecological catastrophe. The current use of the term draws less from those charmed ex-pats than from "the lost decade," the name given to Japan's period of economic stagnation during the '90s. But the two uses point toward different aspects of sociohistorical lostness: one is about a generation not knowing what to do with its capacity within society, the other about a society that doesn't know what to do with its capacity for generation, a world that seems to have already made too much of everything. It is unclear in which way my generation is lost, whether it refers to the seemingly misdirected lives of 20-somethings or our potential that may go unrealized due to the employment crisis and overproduction—unless we open new paths. Having read the essays that follow, I think it's a bit of both.

Of course, the absent jobs that could make us "productive" members of society go a long way toward answering the question of direction. Young people are semi-autonomous when it comes to our life choices, but we are subject as a population to economic and environmental conditions; one could say we are lost because we have been lost. Even

so, we don't seem to be going anywhere. The new phase of "emerging adulthood" described in the now infamous *The New York Times Magazine* article "What Is It About 20-Somethings?"<sup>1</sup> involves a return to the parents' home (as in Lauren Westerfield's "Flexible Lives, Flexible Relationships"). Nothing could be more "found." There is also some irony in calling the most connected generation in the history of mankind "lost." The phone in my pocket can tell me not only where I am but where I might want to go next and how to get there. There are ways in which we could not get lost if we tried.

Or could we? If the directions through which productive potential is traditionally realized (traditional careers, families, housing, modes of transportation) are not going to be open to many of us, as the situation indicates they will not, then we will need to produce and construct new ones. "Make it new" is an old phrase but, from one generation to another, it's still good advice. The original lost generation produced its enduring works of art in flophouses and dive bars, not offices or writing workshops. For the modernists, being lost was a precondition for creation, not a barrier. We have no choice but to cease to think of exploration as a bounded time in which we are to "find" ourselves before we are put to work. For many of us, that end may never come. If the roads are closed, getting lost becomes the only way to move. The alternative is stagnation and the bare-life instrumentality of the on-demand labor contract. (See Ryan Gleason's "The Janus-Faced Craigslist.") We have better things to do with our productive capacities than depress wages for those who cling to traditional employment. Instead, we have the opportunity to create new forms of social organization and patterns of mutual support.

Instead of "finding ourselves," I think my generation would be better off losing ourselves. The selves we can



hope to find ready-made and waiting are not what we've been promised, what we've prepared for (see Sarah Idzik's "Unprepared") or what we want. If the traditional job market fails to accommodate so many young people, then the modes of living devised by and for our parents will remain impossible for us. I mean this not only in terms of living lives centered around consumption and but also in regard to the physical habitats they've built. We will live closer to one another as we realize distance is not the same as safety. In order to survive and even have a chance to live, we will have to build communities of cooperation rather than competition. Learning to live together instead of merely in proximity to each other will be crucial. (See Annamarie Pluhar's "Screening for Gold.") Sometimes getting lost will require us to leave some small possibility of prosperity behind and jump into the unknown. (See Emi Gennis's "Quitter" and Jenna Brager's "Who Needs An Ivory Tower?") Sometimes it means leaving any sort of normal stability behind and taking only what you can carry (Nine gives her inventory in "Take It And Leave It") in search of something truly desirable.

The obvious but tricky question is, Where can we go that is away from this dominant relationship, away from the selling of our lives and planet chunk by chunk, so as not to die? Both the alienated suburbs of my childhood and the costly cities of my adolescent dreams seem unlikely sites. There are places where capital and the state move too slowly, corners they cannot assimilate: the warehouse shells of an exhausted industrialism, the foreclosed homes that hold the ghosts of a dreamed America that never came to be. During Milicent Johnson's adventures in Detroit, she found a city inventing with what's there, moving past what's gone and into something different. There remains space and time where horizontal networks can survive and grow, where new

practices can spring from the scrapheap generated by late capitalism.

Young people can organize themselves under new forms, such as cooperatives (see both of Mira Luna's essays on co-ops) and nomadic communities (see Robin's "Every Guest A Host.") We can depend on each other's living labor rather than the dead value stored in commodities. A shared future means less stuff, which means less digging for more fuel to burn. Networks of collaborative consumption allow people to share goods in common without the burdens and costs of personal ownership, which means less time buying and more time living. If families are those groups of people against whom we refuse to fight in the race up the ladder, then young people are going to get bigger families. Do-it-yourself becomes the best option (as in Melissa Welter's "Eating Rich, Living Poor") and, luckily, ever more feasible as the means of production become more accessible to individual producer/consumers. We must be suspicious of everything we do not build, of everything handed down from an empire in decline, and look to our own hands.

Even while the lives we build are independent, they're still shared, and sharing is what we're gonna need if we're going to get out of youth alive.