**The Revolution That Wouldn’t End**

Tension seems inescapable these days. The strident voices of the news channel on TV are echoed in the argument around the dinner table that often ends with someone saying “There’s just no point talking about this any longer.” Guests sometimes receive the warning, delivered with eyes narrowed, that any talk about politics in this house is forbidden because of the trouble it would cause the family.

The rancor has often jumped off the page in news items on US political matters, just as strongly as it has been heard on TV. Then there are the armies themselves: the protestors and the counter-protestors, usually just shouting at one another, but sometimes engaging in bursts of violence.

Surely this is not the first time in the history of our nation that this sort of thing has happened. Political disagreement must have always been with us from the beginning–the pre-revolution days between the Tories and the Patriots, not to mention the years leading up to the Civil War. Those occasions ended up in armed conflict. Sometimes the present feels about the same. Even if it doesn’t lead to warfare, it has divided our families and our society more deeply than anything we’ve experienced in decades.

When did it all begin? The sharp polarization and deep divides in today’s society, that is. Not just the silly arguments about “fake news” and the machinations of the “deep state,” but something deeper and more lasting. Something that seems more akin to an endless war between two factions of sworn enemies?

*Clash of Sounds: The Social Revolution*

Let’s go back to 1960, just before the big social revolution of my generation took place. Music is a pathway to the past, they say, so why not begin with that?

The big bands of the swing era were fading at that time, and Elvis was just entering the scene. But I found myself enchanted by another type of music that was just becoming popular: the folk songs done by groups like the Kingston Trio, the Brothers Four and the New Christy Minstrels. Folk music then was a grab-bag of old songs that recalled a mythical past: the days of black gospel music, cowboys longing to see their sweethearts, guys on trains or planes who couldn’t wait to get back home. That music, it seemed, looked backwards to a gloried past with all its romantic legends (civic as well as sexual). In the words of one song: “Once there were green fields kissed by the sun/ Once there were valleys where rivers used to run...” Songs like this had more than a whiff of nostalgia; they were drenched in it. If happiness is what you want, the music suggested, look behind you to the good old days. All of us, even fans of the big beat and the new rock music, could relate to that!

By 1963 or so, some of the folk music took on a different tone: one of protest. Singers like Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, and a few others who had sung the ballads to the past began asking questions about the future. “How many years must some people exist before they’re allowed to be free? How many times must a man turn his head pretending he just doesn’t see?” The answers to those questions and many others were “blowing in the wind,” as the song put it. By then, the Civil Rights Movement was at the fore of national attention, but there were other crusades soon to come.

Then, a major shift occurred sometime during the mid-60s. I’m not sure when or how it all happened since I once again disappeared from the scene in 1963 to begin a three-year teaching stint in Micronesia. But at my return to the US in 1966, it seemed that the whole world had changed. The music, beginning with Jimi Hendrix and Janice Joplin, had become loud, insistent, even relentless. Musical styles often change radically, we all knew. Yet, as we only came to realize later, it was not just the style of music that had changed during those years, but what inspired the music. This was a new age–the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, as proclaimed in “Hair,” the musical that seemed to define those times.

It was an age of overnight change: in hair styles and clothes... and in just about everything else. Long sideburns, facial hair and untamed locks were viewed as the unmistakable signs of hippies, those who had freed themselves from society’s staid conventions to become prophets of the New Age. They were free to smoke dope, drop acid, and see visions in their drug-induced dreams. “Leave me alone to taste life,” they seemed to be screaming.

Other sounds, too, defined the times. Some were the strident cries of protest that were breaking out everywhere in those days. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) began the clamor for select social issues. Soon there were the shrill outbursts against the Vietnam War, which grew in intensity throughout the 60s. Many of us will never forget the chant: “Hey, hey, LBJ. How many kids have you killed today?” Even earlier, there were the marches during the Civil Rights Movement, sparked by killings of Black Rights activist Medgar Evers, among others, and the preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr. No one who lived through those times and heard the song “We Shall Overcome” had any doubt about what it is that will be overcome. Yet, the cacophony of sounds included gunshots as well–the shots in 1968 that took the lives of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy.

At first the rebellion, signaled by those early songs and other more discordant sounds, might have appeared to be a reaction against national wrongs: the Vietnam War, White Supremacy and other social ills. But that was just the beginning.

For some years sociological studies had been pointing out the growing atomization of US society. While some of us might have had regrets at the breakdown of conventional society, many others welcomed the change as a grand promise for the future. Take John Lennon’s hit song “Imagine,” for instance. The song was a vision of a world blessedly free of anything, including the nation state and religion, that might mobilize popular sentiment for war. *No matter how revered the institution might be, if it could become a cause for division, let’s get rid of it*, the song suggested. *If this means that we have to remake our social institutions, so be it. We of this New Age can refashion society, including the family itself, to our own tastes*. In fact, the experiments with communes and other voluntary families during those years were an attempt to do just that.

The decade of protest, then, may have begun with marches for the freedom of Blacks or on behalf of the lives of the Vietnamese and the young Americans who would be drafted to fight in that war. Increasingly, however, as the decade of the 60s came to a close, the fight was for personal freedom–the liberation of the individual. *Let me wear long hair if I want. Let me wear as little or as much as I wish. Get off my back. Let me make these decisions myself*. Free speech was part of it, but the spirit behind the calls for freedom was far bigger than this. At bottom, the “revolt” had broadened from a struggle to purify society from its injustice to a protest against society itself, together with the behavioral rules and standards that threatened to strangle the individual person. “How can I possibly be myself if I am bundled in all this tight social clothing?” the freedom fighters seemed to be asking. After all, as the song puts it, “I gotta be me.”

*Why the Hunt for Self?*

Somehow, as the music of that period suggests, a radical shift in direction was taking place. A people with faces turned backwards to a romantic past and a firm grasp on their ideals were now challenged by a generation calling for radical change and an end to social injustice. If our history had been so unkind to so many, why not join the ranks of those promoting the “counter-culture,” as it was called? But even this did not go far enough for those impatient to be rid of all those social restrictions they had come to regard as cloying. *While we’re at, we might as well complete the job and liberate ourselves to be the free individuals we were always meant to be.*

But why the radical campaign to liberate the individual self, we might ask. Didn’t those freedom fighters understand the obvious social fact that the self may be defined over and against the society, but always with the help of the society? Didn’t they appreciate that the individual and the community are not combatants in a mortal struggle, but poles of a continuum that interact with one another? Surely they must have realized that society not only helps define the self, but also guides and protects it? The most illiterate peoples in the darkest of earlier times understood that much, even if they would not have had the words to articulate it in those terms. One doesn’t have to be a sociology major, after all, to grasp what is a lived reality. Could those 60s freedom fighters really have been that naive?

Looking back on this age from a safe distance, we might dismiss the rainbows and ribbons of this age as pretentiousness and its hymns to personal liberation as silliness. We can flip it off as a showy fad that ran its course and faded when we all regained our senses. But I believe that would be a mistake on our part. The decade of the 60s turned out to be a defining moment in American social history, one that would leave its mark on us even today.

Our society was coming on hard times during the 60s, it so happened. The different forms of community that fashion society, beginning with the family but extending well beyond, were already beginning to crumble even before the first sounds of protest were heard. Something ominous was happening to the family and to the other forms of community supporting it that would have a deep and lasting impact on the future.

*The Old Family and What It Offered*

Not so long ago the family–and, by extension, the community–was regarded as a cozy blanket rather than a straight-jacket. It was a welcome comfort rather than a unwanted constraint.

Of course, the family was much more than the members of the household, as I can personally testify. When my own mother died while the five of us boys were still very young, our relatives took good care of us in the wake of the tragedy. After my mom’s death, each of us was sent off to stay with a different family household for a year or so, until my father was able to work out a way to provide for us at home. Even when we were once again living in the housing project apartment, aunts and uncles would drop in on weekends to pay a visit and see how we were doing. But there were also those weekends when we would head off to the home of an aunt and uncle or grandparents for a special dinner and a chance to spend time with our many cousins. We might not have lived under the same roof with the larger family, but we regularly spent time with our relatives. They looked after us as families were supposed to.

Then, too, there was the routine and ritual in our own household. We might have been free to play outdoors after school, but we were expected to be home by dinner. I recall losing a fight one afternoon and running home afterwards in terror, much more worried about being late for dinner–an obligatory event for all of us in the family–than I was about the bruises and scratches on my face. No TV dinners for our family, if only because we didn’t have a television set yet. There were other rituals, too: homework, bedtime, and prayers (often in common as we knelt beside our beds).

To all this let’s add another dimension of our community: the neighborhood. Even in our own low-income housing project we knew the names of everyone in our section of family units, and the next one down, and perhaps even the one after that. The units in the housing project might not have had porches with rocking chairs, but we did sit on the stoops and chat with the people next door. Neighbors would bring over cookies from time to time, just as my father would offer to give a haircut to any of the kids who needed one. The sense of community was highlighted on certain occasions: as when we would gather around a neighbor’s apartment with heads hung low as attendants carried off a sick person into the waiting ambulance; or on Christmas eve when the fellow next door, with his accordion, teamed up with my father on his violin to play carols for any and all who wanted to listen.

We kids were allowed to go out to play every afternoon without real concern for our safety, since our neighborhood was an extension of home, with plenty of eyes to watch out for us. The eyes included those of the stern older women who didn’t hesitate to scold us for what they regarded as naughty behavior. They were the keepers of tradition–the old-fashioned values and behavior that we were supposed to honor–just in case our parents forgot to instruct us. But they also made sure that no harm came to us. Now and then, of course, one of us would come home bruised, often enough from a fight with another kid, but none of that was life-threatening.

Is this an idealized picture of times long past? It didn’t seem that we were unusual if I were to judge from the stories my classmates told me about their own families and neighborhoods. The details might differ but, on the whole, suburbanites and apartment dwellers, along with us housing project kids, lived under a system with the same strong supports and effective constraints. We all enjoyed what the age of the strong family could offer. The sense of belonging we felt provided the personal identity we needed.

*The Decline of Family and Community*

Somehow the tight ties with the family and neighborhood that were such a cherished part of my own past mysteriously started to unravel. Not all at once, of course, and not because of a single identifiable cause. Who knew what was responsible for the changes? The post-war employment boom? Or perhaps the mobility of the population aided by affordable automobiles and the new interstate highway system? Or could the explosion of television a decade earlier have been the catalyst for some of the changes?

The decline in social institutions had been in process for some time, according to certain social scientists, but it became more pronounced after the Second World War. The extended family, a holdover from rural farm society, had been dissolving for more than a century, as David Brooks reminds us in an article in the March 2020 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*. By the late 1960s, those residual features of the broader family–the sleigh ride (or car drive) to grandfather’s house for Christmas dinner, the regular visits between aunts and uncles, the readiness of relatives to step in whenever needed–were rapidly vanishing. As a result, many families could no longer count on the regular support that my own family received from relatives when we badly needed it.

It’s true that the nuclear family was undeniably strong in the immediate post-war years. Those old magazine photos showing a beaming family at dinner and the text honoring those grand old family values were an accurate portrayal of its importance.. Indeed, Brooks is far from alone in regarding the period 1950-1965 as the heyday of the nuclear family. But, as the climate of social trust and the strong support from the community declined, the nuclear family weakened. The daily call to family dinner was heard in fewer and fewer homes, as the old ritual gatherings of the household went out of fashion. Even when family members gathered in the living room, they often fell silent in front of the TV screen. But let’s not exaggerate the importance of the TV set; it might not have been as much a cause of the social changes as a convenient refuge after the fact.

Other factors may have been responsible for the changes, but the result is undeniable: even the nuclear family, the tightest social circle enveloping the individual, was breaking down. Brooks offers data suggesting that 1965 might be identified as the turn-around year: in that year the divorce rate started to spike and the number of out-of-wedlock children began its steady climb. The former signaled serious cracks in the conventional family structure, while the latter augured the rise of a large segment of the population that wouldn’t have access to a normal family structure in the first place.

For years we had been shedding our extended family. Now we were also snapping some of the bonds holding the nuclear family together. We were seeing many more single-parent families because of the rising divorce rate and the sharp increase in unmarried couples “shacking up” without shame. All this presented a challenge to the picture of the traditional family smiling at us from the pages of the popular magazines just a few years earlier. The nuclear family was by no means dead, but it was no longer the almost universal norm it had once been. Today only one-third of all Americans live in a traditional two-parent nuclear family, Brooks tells us. And all this is without even taking into account the devastation of the family occurring within inner city Black communities.

While all this was happening, there was also a nationwide decline of membership in voluntary organizations. My grandfather might have been a proud member of the Knights of St. John, but none of my uncles joined the organization. The Freemasons, who built and later sold off the building converted into the high school I attended, had seen their heyday decades earlier. Even the Kiwanis, Elks and Rotary Club, together with the Scouts, found their membership continually dwindling. Those informal groups, too, like canasta clubs, sewing circles, and book clubs with their regularly scheduled gatherings were becoming more rare. So, it wasn’t just the family dinners and the visits to grandparents that were going out of fashion, but even the nights out for bowling with a small circle of close friends, as Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, reports. More and more, it seemed, we were losing our old support systems and being left on our own.

With the shedding of these social wrappings, the individual lost much of the safety net that had protected him in the past. Formerly, even if the mother was gone, there was always an aunt to replace her. One of the kids might have special learning problems, but there were others around who could fill in and provide the extra care needed. But the times were a-changing, as the song goes.

Another casualty of this change were the confining bonds of social control, unwelcome at times, but designed to protect the person from self-damage. The repeated warnings that worried family members and neighbors issued to carefree teenagers to avoid conduct that would bring shame to everyone were quieted. These shackles went the way of the safety net. But the payoff, of course, was the freedom that the New Age young person enjoyed.

Out of this transitional time sprang the post-war generation called the Boomers–otherwise known as the ‘Me’ Generation. In the words of David Brooks, “Around 1965, a communal ‘we first’ consciousness was replaced by an individualistic ‘me first’ consciousness.” Social conventions of many kinds were abandoned as far too restrictive. Besides, these conventions were a product of a society that was itself judged flawed. The goal was to find and be true to oneself, sloughing off those family bonds, social conventions, and anything else that hampered the freedom of the individual. It was not the first time in history that humans worshiped at the altar of individualism, but this surge seemed far more potent than those we had previously experienced.

*Fruit of the Social Revolution: Growing Polarization*

Were we all asleep while the earth was shaking beneath our feet? Not exactly, although most of us could not have guessed how unsettling this would be in the years to come. Many of us probably dismissed much of what was happening as no more than a fad that would pass in time. But as time passed and the changes persisted, people increasingly drifted into one of two camps.

Even in the late 1960s, at the height of the social revolution that was being fought in the US, polarization was evident. When I reported for my first pastoral assignment after my ordination in 1969, I was surprised to find that the Jesuit pastor would not accept me unless I shaved my sideburns, even though the sideburns were quite modest by the standard of that day. He explained that his parishioners would find my appearance offensive. Facial hair of any kind–moustaches, beards and long sideburns–was associated with the counter-culture and its revolutionary agenda. There were those who supported such radical changes and those who opposed them. My appearance, the pastor said, would have made it clear on which side of the line I stood. A few days later, after some prodding from my superiors, I reluctantly trimmed my sideburns and showed up again to begin work in the parish. I remember thinking at the time that in a few years this silliness will be long gone. Little did I know!

Those shrill voices with their uncompromising demands were altering the political landscape of the day. Between 1968 and 1972, as Jill Lepore points out in her recent book *These Truths*, political polarization began to rise significantly. This was in stark contrast to the previous decade or two, when the two major political parties had come to bear an uncanny resemblance to one another–almost as if they had run out of issues to argue about. In the 1950s social scientists like Daniel Bell were confidently proclaiming the end of ideology. Then, all of a sudden, the new age of polarization began.

To understand this, we have to remember that the 1960s had also become the age of the great liberation movements. The Civil Rights campaign, which soon morphed into Black Power, was first. Then the women’s liberation movement, which led to a recognition of women’s rights, culminating in the 1973 Supreme Court decision on abortion that granted them “rights over their own bodies.” Gay Liberation, touched off in 1968 by the celebrated incident at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, began at about the same time.

But that was just the beginning of the rights movement. The claims quickly multiplied under the familiar rationale: *If that group over there has the right to be recognized for who they are, why not our group?* So the recognition of gays and lesbians was followed by claims of bisexuals, transsexuals, and then Q’s. In short, we saw the unending splintering of groups and the demand for rights, along with the insistence on self-definition. *Let me decide which group I fit into, but if none of them works let me create another*.

Individual liberation, the theme of the late 1960s, was being replayed many times over. The influence of that early movement, with its emphasis on separation and pride, was obvious. The motto of any of these rights movements could have been the same: *Walk tall even if you must walk alone*.

As the groups demanding support proliferated, the list of offenses from which they must be protected grew ever longer. So did the measures proposed, and oftentimes enacted in legislation, to guarantee the required protection of their “rights” Those who rallied to support these groups and their causes may have believed that they were simply building on the past–assisting the needy today just as progressives had done for centuries before. Black slavery may have ended, and so had public lynchings many decades later, but equal rights for Blacks still remained an unachieved goal. Intimate relationships between couples of the same sex might no longer be punishable by imprisonment, but there was still the matter of ensuring that gays were not discriminated against or publicly disparaged. For that matter, why should they be denied the right to full civil marriage?

Ensuring full rights to the ever increasing number of groups claiming these rights could take a very long time. So the battle cries were raised on one issue after another as the causes multiplied over the next decade or two. At first the battles may have been fought on particular issues, and the division was largely viewed as something transitory. But as the issues multiplied and the battle lines hardened, we began to feel the full effects of the polarization that the social revolution had brought about.

*National Response Over the Years*

This is not to say that people didn’t shift from one side to another. Many of those old hippies may have shed their headbands and started dressing conventionally for work when they had families to support. Others might have felt deluded by the starry hopes and grand promises of those earlier years. Persons might have shuttled from one side to another, but the two major pathways became ever stronger through the years.

To the right walked those with a growing repugnance to the “reforms” and all the new legislation they entailed, as they watched the growing distance between themselves and the past. To the left went those with endless confidence in the future and what it might bring–those who trusted that even if many of its fundamental institutions had been crippled, their nation would always be able to forge on even more proudly because of the legislative foundation that had been set in place to protect its people–*all* its people.

This was far from the first divisive moment in the nation’s history, of course. Some of the past divisions led to riots; a few of them even led the sides to take up arms against one other. The social revolution of the 60s may have been just the most recent of those defining times. Again the fork in the road appeared. But the choice of which path to take was not made exclusively, not even mainly, on the basis of issues. It was made on something more deeply rooted than that. We could call it “sentiment,” as George Will does, or perhaps a gut reaction–certainly something instinctive rather than heady.

Even as early as 1964, the social revolution that had barely begun generated a political reaction; in that year Barry Goldwater ran for president on a strong conservative platform. He may have lost overwhelmingly, but Ronald Reagan won the office in 1980. George Will, the conservative columnist for the Washington Post, later remarked, tongue in cheek, that Goldwater had actually won the election... “but it just took 16 years to count the votes.” Over those same years, a growing number of Americans seem to have become disenchanted with what the social revolution had produced. Or, more to the point, they felt that they themselves had been ignored in the process.

Occasionally America enjoyed moments in which the entire nation seemed to pull itself together to celebrate the nation’s past. This was especially evident in the 1970s as the divisions were hardening and we were beginning to understand that the deep-seated differences would not disappear when radical hair styles went out of fashion. One of those moments was the celebration of the nation’s bicentennial in 1976, when it briefly felt as if we were united for a change. Another of an altogether different type might have occurred a few years later when the motion picture “Rocky” began playing in theaters across the country. As I watched the film in a theater on Guam, I was stirred in a way I imagined many other Americans might be. If a nobody like Rocky Balboa, who could barely manage a complete sentence, was able to work his way to the top and give the reigning boxing champ a run for his money, maybe there was something to the American dream after all. The reassurance was especially timely, coming as it did when we were licking our wounds after the loss of the Vietnam War and trying to recover from the economic fallout from the huge increase in fuel prices.

There were also those other time-outs, when the nation seemed to halt its incessant search for group rights and the laws to uphold those rights. Is it stretching things too much to imagine that those occasional swings to the right (Nixon in 1968 and Reagan in 1980) were, implicitly at least, as much a sour reaction to the years of social upheaval as to the over-reach of big government? At bottom, much of the conservative political shift might have represented a clamor from a large segment of the population to overturn the social revolution that had been taking place and restore “sanity”–that is, a return to “traditional values.”

The 1980s might have appeared to be a time of tranquillity, when the tone of the political conversation had become gentler and the differences between liberals and conservatives more muted. In many ways the decade seemed to be the very opposite of the 60s, with its vocal clashes over everything from personal couture to deep-seated social issues. But as Americans were enjoying the respite, another major divide was deepening: the mounting economic disparity between the rich and poor. It was the 1980s, the “hands off” days of government administration, that, ironically enough, ended up weakening the financial and social status of its greatest cheerleaders. The average salaries of CEOs, which had formerly been 20 times higher than their mid-management employees, skyrocketed to 400 times that of their salaried staff afterwards, as Wade Davis reminds us in a recent article in *Rolling Stone*. If ordinary workers, white-collar or blue, could complain about being outsiders before, they had even more reason for complaint now.

We should also remember that at the end of this decade the USSR suddenly collapsed, signaling the end of the Cold War. Our nation might have breathed a long collective sigh of relief as the major foreign menace that dominated US policy for so long was finally removed. In fact, however, the external threat that Communism represented acted as a restraint against national polarization. Wars–even Cold Wars–unite nations.

By the end of the 80s, the nation remained strongly divided–even as the economic gap was deepening. Moreover, with the removal of the Red Menace, one of the bonds unifying the country had been removed. Any hope for a sudden restoration of those other social institutions–mainly the family and community–that have always helped bind us together as a people would be frustrated in the decades to come.

*Meanwhile, What About the Family*?

While social conservatives had no way to restore the old-fashioned family they venerated, progressives didn’t appear to have much of a model for a family that might substitute for it. They seemed willing to apply one legislative adaptation after another in the hope they might somehow come up with a bandaged society that was workable today.

It was left to the people, then, to salvage their families as best they could. On my periodic visits back to the US, I began noticing the signs in motels or smaller hotels welcoming the McGuires or the Dworakowskis or whatever family they happened to be hosting at the time. Determined to overcome the distance separating their members, some families had rented hotel rooms or apartments so they could gather for the weekend. I saw it as a valiant effort to retrieve something of their extended family. My own family intentionally made the same effort when they began gathering each summer, 60 or 70 strong, for a week or two in the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York. It seems that my brothers and their spouses had decided that the broader family was too important to lose.

For a time even neighborhoods seemed to be committed to preserving their old importance. Some took to bringing households together by running block parties featuring eats, music and dancing in the street. Others formed neighborhood associations to plan regular activities and to post watchmen as a protection against unwelcome intrusion from outsiders.

Despite such efforts, the community everyone so fondly remembered was long gone–a victim not of ill-advised political policies, but of the social forces that had been at work on the country for years. That 60s revolution enshrining the individual had left its enduring effects after all. As Brooks plainly put it in his *Atlantic* article, “Social conservatives insist that we can bring back the nuclear family. But the conditions that made for stable nuclear families in the 1950s are never returning.” The old family and society that we remembered so fondly were gone for good.

While we were grieving the loss of the treasured family and community we once enjoyed, disruption was occurring on an even broader level. The national family itself was being torn apart.

*The Beat Goes On*

Meanwhile, the quest for the empowered individual (or splinter group) was relentlessly moving forward. Decades after the appeal of long hair faded, other markers for the expression of liberty were posted. The old rules forbidding sexual expression between same sex partners may have been stricken from the books, but there were always other reforms to be pursued. Is there any good reason an individual who styles him(her)self as transgender should be forbidden to use either the male or female bathroom? Shouldn’t we guarantee that those suffering from certain maladies should be addressed as “disadvantaged” or “challenged” rather than in those crude terms that once may have been used to describe their condition? Even if a married woman is not physically beaten by her spouse, doesn’t the inner torment she suffers at times make her a victim of psychological abuse?

The hairsplitting took other forms as well. Could certain kinds of punishment like spanking or denial of privileges be considered a form of abuse? Did the term “abuse” include the bullied as well? Just how many ways are there to be bullied? But isn’t “shamed” just a finer shade of “bullied”? Besides, one can be shamed not only by losing a fight and running home in tears (as happened to me more than once), but when someone is bold enough to suggest that I could stand to lose a few pounds. Even worse, how about when someone makes a nasty comment about another on Facebook or any public forum?

The principle was clear: individuals should be able to define themselves pretty much as they wish, and in the age of the empowered individual their wishes should be deferred to. If the transvestite woman next door would prefer to be regarded as a man, we must acknowledge her status without taunting her or even giggling. That is what came to be known as political correctness–a restriction on speech, or “gag rule,” that could be traced back to those free spirits who once protested against this very form of restriction. Moreover, to accept this liberation principle was to commit to an exhausting campaign for rights that would never end. Nor would those rights, even when supposedly won, resolve the matter. After all, the issues could be endlessly shaded ever more finely. Meanwhile, more social conventions tottered and fell.

As all this was happening, the two opposing groups were swapping labels, oddly enough. The freedom fighters who had been championing individual rights from the beginning were being tagged “socialists”–perhaps because of their reliance on government reforms to effect the changes they fought for. The conservatives, with their smarmy view of the good old days, had conveniently forgotten how much that glorious past depended on government programs (like those that had lifted the jobless out of the worst effects of the depression and those that had enabled veterans to continue their education or buy a home after World War II). They had proudly become known as the supporters of individual achievement. No free gifts from the government for this party!

*Consolidation of the Opposition*

Those opposed to this endless liberation movement became more concerned as the years passed, and their voice grew louder. Their cry sounded a lot like this. *Enough of this excessive honor paid to the empowered individual! Haven’t we had our fill of this endless race to chase down one endangered minority group after another so that we can guarantee their legal rights? Let’s distance ourselves from all this topsy turvy change and the damage it’s done to our society. Let’s do homage to the society built long ago on the basis of those values at the heart of our nation. Let’s look backwards, for that is where we will find the key to our future.*

This right-wing reactionary group, which saw themselves as snubbed outsiders, increasingly ignored by power-holders, began to adopt the political language of liberation in their protests. For a group that always stood strongly against extreme individualism, this might seem like a strange reversal of position. But here they were, now appealing for their own freedom: freedom from the strangling bonds of big government, freedom to carry firearms, freedom from the high taxes that enabled the expanding welfare system. It was as if the conservatives were defiantly saying: *If you’re so interested in liberating neglected groups, what about us? Our world is becoming more unfamiliar to us each day as new laws pile up and social demands change? Don’t we deserve a little attention ourselves?*

Could the conservative political movement, with its strong insistence on freedom, have really been, at bottom, a demand to let people be allowed to take care of themselves? Was this a plea for a return to the “good old days”–the days in which endless demands for individual liberties did not echo everywhere? The days in which social conventions were strong enough to bond individuals into some sort of cohesive group? The days in which the society itself was somehow able to achieve what the government through its multiple social programs was hoping to recreate today? Were the reactionaries asking to dispense with the social revolution and go back to those old times when community life seemed to take care of our needs? Were they saying, at bottom: *We don’t need to forge a new society; all we need is to recapture the one we once had*? *The society in which we used to feel as if we were contributing members*.

*The Two Contending Forces*

On one side were the relentless freedom-fighters, especially those who felt they themselves had benefitted from the liberation of the self, and so felt obliged to take action on behalf of other individuals or groups whose freedom was seen to be threatened. We need not paint them as simply self-absorbed individualists content to see their society split into hundreds of fragmented cliques. Many of them had witnessed first-hand the early successes of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society: the signing of the Economic Opportunity Act and the Food Stamp Act in 1964, and the implementation of Medicare and Medicaid the following year. Support for impoverished families and medical benefits for those who would not otherwise have been able to afford them marked real progress in dealing with the inequities in our society. We might have a long way to go, but programs like these offered real hope that the poverty which divided our society might eventually be eradicated. The dream was that, as this happened, our nation might become whole once again.

The freedom-fighters may have been aware of the decline of the family and support groups that had been going on for some time now, but they were preoccupied with other matters. They may have believed that, as the groups they championed won their basic freedoms, the cohesive society we had been losing over the years might somehow be restored. Perhaps this would occur as a by-product of the new society being built. Even as some of the programs they endorsed–removal of abused children from their parents, for instance, and safe refuge for women at risk of harm from their spouses–protected individuals, those same programs threatened the shell of the family. Yet, their implicit assumption seemed to be that the fractured family, like the divided society, would heal itself.

On the other side of the growing divide were those with eyes fixed steadily on the past, determined somehow to recapture a past that looked more enchanting with every passing year. Why try to build a new society, they wondered, when not too long ago we had one that worked well for all of us? In fact, the further we pursue what the “freedom fighters” call progress, the more distant we become from that grand and glorious past.

The warmth of that past can be reclaimed in different places: in the tender embrace of a family that ate together daily, in an old neighborhood (perhaps the kind that survives even today in small towns in the Midwest and the South); in the old-fashioned schoolyard (where corporal punishment didn’t merit a #911 call); in the society that could take care of itself and didn’t need new legislation every few days to define, and criminalize, situations that the community could have easily handled on its own. It was a past that had no need of liberals to school everyone on how to speak without offending others.

The response of this group was as simple as it was reactionary. *Must this so-called liberation go on forever? Just let us alone to take care of ourselves. Butt out, government!* This may sound like the reaction we would expect of farm boys in suspenders and boots. But as the years passed, this attitude seemed to be shared not just by country folk, but also by Wall Street financiers and millionaires living behind high walls. Also by church people who would look back fondly to the old days of filled pews, a strict moral code unchallenged by government interference, and hiring policies that were left in the hands of church officials. Those were the days when government refrained from interfering with the church’s moral teaching by legalizing abortion, insisting on the distribution of condoms, and granting marriage to same-sex couples.

What some saw as triumph others saw as devastating loss. The same reforms that the progressives saw as a path to liberation were viewed by reactionaries as an assault on the old society they greatly revered. In fact, many of the reactionaries came to believe that the liberals had deliberately conspired to deny them what they sought. How else could their beloved society have been so seriously damaged in such a short time! Who might have been involved in such a conspiracy, the shape that it might have taken, and even the motive may have been open questions over the years. But the widespread assumption was that only the secret collaboration of hostile forces could have brought about such a tragedy.

*Where Do We Go From Here?*

Political divisions have been a fact of life in the US from the very beginning of the republic, as historians are quick to point out. Social changes, with the disruption they inevitably bring, have also been ongoing over the centuries. Somehow the nation and its people have survived by making necessary adjustments even as they bridged the worst of the divisions among them.

While the “social revolution” described here may not be unprecedented in our history, it was real and its effects are still being felt today. In the 1960s the battle for liberation for groups that had struggled for recognition over the years evolved into a full-throated cry for justice–at first for the groups and then for all persons. We don’t have to credit the wild-eyed reformists of that era for everything that happened. The radical individualism that grew out of this revolution, as we have seen, was bolstered by the weakening of those social systems–the family and the neighborhood–that had always provided support for the individual in the past.

The torrent of legislation to ensure the rights of one group after another was one effect of the revolution; the heightened importance afforded to political correctness was another. Reaction to the social reform was mixed, as we know. The battle for the liberation of the individual which began more than a half century ago triggered a polarization in the American public that has only deepened with time. Our reactions to it strongly color our political views, but at bottom they are more of a visceral social response than an issue-based response. If we are ever to begin speaking to one another so as to bridge this divide, we ought to understand something about the social dimension of our differences.

Those looking back with fond eyes to the past should realize that the past might not have been as untroubled as they imagine it. There were ethnic differences that degenerated into gang fights and battles for territorial control, as I can personally recall from the 1940s and 1950s. Some of the families from that seemingly golden age needed financial help–and much more, especially when children and wives were badly mistreated. But even if we were to regard the family of those days as the ideal, how are we supposed to restore it when so much of the culture that supported it has changed?

Those with eyes firmly set on the future must also be realistic. They must realize that their advocacy for “rights” agenda may produce ever diminishing results. Establishing the right of transgender people to use whatever bathroom they wish will not necessarily produce a better society. In short, the overall good of society may not be advanced by empowering splinter groups, especially if all this divides rather than unites that society.

The first priority now is to get beyond the effects of the social revolution and to unify our society once again. To do so, we’ll have to talk honestly about what divided us in the first place. This means recognition that the difference involves far more than party platforms and political issues. It reaches far deeper than that. My hope is that in exploring the roots of this division, we might find the language that we so badly need if we are to engage with one another about our differences. Once that happens, we may find ourselves speaking with one another rather than shouting.

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