

Title: 20/20 Hindsight

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The current state of national and international affairs causes me to reflect on how dramatically my outlook on life has changed over the past seven decades.

As a child in the 1950s and early 1960s I lived an easy, middle-class life. My adult role models ensured I did not take that for granted.

I did not like vegetables. Mommy hid peas in my mashed potatoes, and when I complained, Daddy reminded me about starving Armenian children overseas. Christmas and birthdays occasioned lovely gifts. I learned to write heartfelt thank-you notes.

My parents encouraged me to be independent and to try new things—responsibly, of course. I learned about consequences, and thus to think before acting. Privileges disappeared when my sense of responsibility lapsed. I learned the virtues of being kind, honest, and trustworthy, and I felt the pain of being lied to and bullied.

In the mid-1960s I briefly experienced economic hardships after my parents divorced, but I didn't fully appreciate that lesson—Mom sacrificed financially to protect me, and I always felt loved. When she remarried, my stepdad adopted me, and the comfortable life returned.

By the late 1960s, I witnessed American society beginning to tatter. Race riots, Vietnam War protests, assassinations, women burning bras to highlight inequality and injustice, and flower children tuning out and turning on dominated the headlines. For the first time in my life, I paid attention to the wider world around me. I became conscious that our social order put limitations on what I'd be able to do as a woman. I vowed to fight such repression, no matter what the cost. I entered that battle when I enrolled in college in 1972 and declared a forestry major—just because people told me that girls can't do that.

It's a good thing I ended up liking forestry, because it involved a lot of math and science, subjects at which I did not excel. Hard work and tutoring paid off, though, and I picked up valuable life skills along with the diploma. During those years my contrarian impulses hardened, and I increasingly pursued paths that society discouraged for females.

In the post-college employment realm of the late 1970s, I encountered first-hand the “good old boys” who actively tried to keep me from succeeding. It worked, for a while. I had to toil twice as hard as the men for less pay and zero recognition.

Disgusted, I loaded my pickup and moved to Idaho's north woods, determined to be entirely self-sufficient and blow off the repressive American society. I prided myself on being beholden to no one. I did it pretty well, living for several years beyond the pavement, without running water or electricity.

I read widely during that time, mostly about history and societal patterns. I realized that I could trace at least part of my desire to be a rugged individualist back to my childhood enjoyment of television programs such as *Bonanza!* and *Little House on the Prairie*, which glorified self-sufficiency and extolled many of the virtues under which I'd been raised. Upon deeper reflection, it dawned on me that these shows also reenforced the societal mores I was then fighting against, primarily the idea that females are weak and, therefore, lesser beings. I recognized the contradiction, but I naïvely believed that if I could overcome the limitations of being a woman, that I could succeed as an independent human being. I didn't understand a bigger picture that involved community, forming alliances, and larger movements working toward justice for all.

That narrative deluded me for over a decade. I returned to civilization in the 1980s and worked hard to overcome being female, while shamelessly casting blame for society's

shortcomings on the nebulous enemy some called “Big Government.” I saw my increasing success in life solely as a result of my own efforts to buck the odds.

My perspective gradually broadened as the new millennium dawned. I began looking at issues through multiple lenses, which made me understand that just about everything is, in some way, interrelated. I continued to value my independence and deep-seated work ethic, but I no longer blindly believed everything I read. It was a slow slog.

Why did people who worked every bit as hard as I did seem to take two steps backward for every step forward? I saw the gap between the “haves” and the “have nots” spiraling beyond imagination. Productivity increased while wages stagnated. The prices of groceries and utilities skyrocketed, reducing disposable income. Because health insurance became unaffordable, many folks went without. The expensive health care system, beyond broken, did not serve average Americans. People felt crushed and helpless. The Tea Party movement began in 2009 in response to the gutting of the middle class.

As we entered the second decade of the new century, housing took a bigger bite out of paychecks; homelessness rose. Some politicians and commentators blamed the poor and called them lazy, stupid, and addicted. But I met educated homeless people who worked two jobs and were not hooked on drugs or alcohol. I encountered young families living in tents and campers because they couldn’t afford any other place to live. Meanwhile, “the rich got richer and the poor got poorer,” just like in the 1967 Tom T. Hall song. It seems there is nothing new under the sun.

Today’s crisis is, at least in part, the result of us not paying attention. Democracies don’t just maintain themselves. Citizens must participate or they risk losing it.

Schools no longer teach civics, nor do they impart critical thinking skills as they once did. In increasingly dumbed-down classes, students learn what to think instead of how to think.

Tightening budgets have forced discontinuation of education in the arts, and it appears as if ethics are no longer considered essential. How can we expect young people to survive, much less excel, if we don't give them the tools they need?

We the people must stop playing the blame game. We need to take responsibility for our actions and own our mistakes. We need each other. Communities thrive when people support one another and work together for the common good. Success is not a zero-sum game. The old cliché is true—a rising tide floats all boats.

I urge all of us to look beyond politics and focus on creating community.