

Searching for Myself in a Time of Change

To Bob Dylan
All I can do is be me...

Introduction

In 1967 I dropped out of college and was living in the East Village of New York, searching for meaning and a purpose in life. It was a time of protest songs and peace marches to end the war in Viet Nam. My “counterculture” generation was questioning our social programming of how we should live. We were on a quest to discover our own truth and break free of outmoded ways of living.

There are remarkable parallels between the cultural revolution of the 1960’s and the transitional times we are now involved in — pivotal times of social transformation. In 2016, we are asking where humanity is headed and what is the next phase of the human journey that is calling to us as a species. We are experiencing a cultural shift to an innovative mind set where the “ordinary” is obsolete and the “extraordinary” becomes the norm.

I am resurrecting this essay, written in 1968 as a school paper, and offering it to the homeless, home-free youth of today as fodder for reflection and self-examination. I am speaking to everyone who values personal freedom and the choice to be themselves. How much or how little has changed since the 60’s rebellion against a repressive System? “The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind.”

This article is an honest description of how I saw the world as a young person growing up in the midst of radical change.

~~~~~

The winter sun peered over rows of tenement roofs in the Lower East Side of Manhattan and streamed into the windows of our 6<sup>th</sup> floor walk-up, highlighting Harriet’s straw blonde hair. Drinking tea in the living room, we reflected on our hopes, dreams and fantasies, and compared them to the lives we were now living. Not what we expected. We mourned the demise of the magnificent ambitions of our childhood days as we came face-to-face

with a culture opposed to our values. We asked ourselves, and we asked each other: “Where are we going? What is the next step?”

Before and during my college years, I was captivated by the genius of the great thinkers of the existentialist movement and their philosophy of nihilism. They believed that there is no explanation for our very existence. “Nothingness lies coiled at the heart of being like a worm,” wrote Jean-Paul Sartre. “The absurd is the essential concept and the first Truth,” wrote Albert Camus. “God is dead,” cried Frederick Nietzsche. Since at heart I was a philosopher, my search for meaning became the centerpiece of my quest for knowledge. How to find meaning in one’s life when we have been born into an indifferent and absurd universe?

Hence, the sense of Nothingness Harriet and I felt inside. Time made no sense. Anonymous day faded into anonymous day – today into tomorrow into forever. Each tomorrow budded off the now moment and assumed its place as yesterday.

*Yesterday is only a memory  
and tomorrow is never what it is supposed to be.*

Bob Dylan

Our problem was what to do with today. For my friend Liz, each morning ushered in a feeling of confusion and despair. Temperamentally an artist, she resisted being told what to do and being at the beck and call of “superiors.”

Liz wanted work that could be lived and enjoyed, not merely endured. She was seeking work personally meaningful for her, work she could believe in. She made efforts at job hunting, but nothing suited her. At times, she settled for jobs she didn’t want, then quit because she couldn’t face them. It was hard to work for someone else after being responsible only to herself. It was hard to adjust to the working world after being a student for most of her life. But as a college drop-out, she was unqualified for the few good jobs she did find.

Liz refused to compromise her moral values. I understood. Life is short and every moment holy. With so much in the world to discover and experience, how could anyone with a soul pour out his or her life force into work that is useless and demoralizing? I recoiled at the prospect of becoming a slave of “The System,” which broke people’s spirits and undermined their ideals, then bribed them with status, money and power into moral complacency.

My economic philosophy developed as I rebelled against the controlling attitude of my father and his point of view as to what really matters in life. His heart was closed and he was insensitive to the suffering of others. We were polar opposites. My distaste for the corporate world began at home at the dinner table as I felt him venting his anger and frustration from that day at work. Like a Gestapo sergeant, he ruled his department of the company with an iron hand. Bringing home to us children his cold executive power, he was a tyrant who could blow up with anger at any moment. His company manufactured what I deemed as “luxury items.” I was judgmental of his values and appalled by his lack of social conscience. I asked, “Why manufacture things that no one needs when poor children are starving in China?”

As a philosophy major at Antioch College, I pondered over the writings of the great thinkers that changed the world. Included were the Age of Enlightenment thinkers who founded some of the beliefs systems that underpin society today. To my amazement, the genius minds of the ages did not agree. In fact, they differed on many subjects. I could not put my trust in any of them. Since Antioch taught me to become an independent thinker, I would not take other people’s word for anything, nor give away my power. No one had a monopoly on the truth. I realized I needed to seek my own inspiration and formulate my own ideology of how the world should be.

I believed in economic justice. Every person deserved to have a decent standard of living. Each one of us had unique gifts and talents that were meant to be shared for the betterment of society. Each individual’s contribution enhanced the well-being of the whole. When the nations of the world learned to co-operate, with a just distribution of wealth and resources, the basic survival needs of all people would be met.

The capitalist tenet of competition was abrasive to my moral values. It fostered a *me against them* attitude, whereas I wanted *we together*. I did not want to live in a dog-eat-dog world, nor become a cog in the social machine. Polish your ego and join the Rat Race. Me! Me! Me!

In my estimation, capitalism was the economic correlate of the Darwinian doctrine of *survival of the fittest*. Since by conscience I was an altruist, I wanted to help the poor and oppressed rise up and meet their destiny. I believed the strong should protect the weak and lend them a hand. The Biblical phrase, *We are our brother’s keeper*, resonated deeply within me. Even though I was born Jewish, the teachings of Jesus Christ rang true to my heart.

The System wanted me to believe in a reality that contradicted my inner sense of rightness. In this topsy-turvy world, the truth was suppressed and lies were tools to press the masses into conformity. I wanted to live the lifestyle I chose and felt it was my right to do so.

*This is the story of America.  
Everybody's doing what they think they are supposed to do.*  
Jack Kerouac, On the Road

We young people were not seeking to achieve but rather to be ourselves. Somehow, everything we once wanted to be or do had been poisoned. There was nothing left to want to be a success in. *I've got nothin', Ma, to live up to*, sang Bob Dylan. Perhaps it was the hypocrisy of a country that talked peace but killed children in Viet Nam, or the corporate establishment that exploited the poor and turned people into machines. The neurotic state of American society was the price of its own "progress." We looked for the great American democracy that we were taught about in grade school and instead found an oligarchy of the rich and powerful. Thus we refused to join this society at the expense of our idealism. Some dropped out. Others formed the New Left and planned for change and revolution.

It was hard to be born into a world you didn't choose and then be forced to grow up in it, to be told you'd better like it or at least compromise yourself and adjust. My parents and their generation sweated their youths away to realize their dreams of split-level paradises bursting with mass produced gadgets and TV sets making a wasteland of their minds. Contemporary America was largely the creation of their lifetimes and thus must be good and beautiful because they made it and it belonged to them. Not to us. We couldn't appreciate the comfortable American life because we neither suffered through the Depression nor endured economic hardship. They told us they built this world for us, their children, so we could live better than they ever had a chance to. Naturally, they couldn't understand why we wanted to sleep on mattresses on the floor in the East Village. We didn't want their America. We wanted to re-make the face of the Earth according to our own dreams.

Our middle class parents didn't realize how much the world had changed in the prior twenty years. They assumed we should be like them because we were their children, that we should want what they wanted. Many still believed in the communist conspiracy, that our country must sponsor

outmoded crusades to save the world for the right and true. We saw and felt the 1960's in a different way. Unshackled to cultural mores, we were making it all up as we went along.

Rather than grow up in an adult world they could not accept, some of my friends retreated into an extended adolescence marked by irresponsibility and self-indulgence. The typical complacent American was hardly a model for them to look up to. They saw the qualities of children as the ideal norm for everyone. Drawing on their child-like spirits, they became uninhibited, sensitive, curious, and unafraid to question things adults became inured to.

The Puritan Ethic called for sacrificing the present for the future. But we had neither the goals, nor the energy to pursue them. Notwithstanding countless hours of soul searching, it was hard to find anything we wanted enough to get up and go after. The world was in bad shape; one person's piddling efforts wouldn't make a difference. It was easier – less painful – to do nothing.

Hence, the timelessness Harriet and I felt on sunny winter mornings. We didn't know what to do with ourselves. There was no dearth of people and institutions that made it their business to tell everybody what to do, but we wouldn't have listened anyway. We lost respect for them. They didn't understand our needs. Law and custom, rewards and punishment, no longer awed us into obedience as they had when we were children.

After rejecting the normal reasons for doing things, we sadly found that satisfactory reasons were hard to come by. We knew what we didn't want, but we didn't know what we did want. We felt empty inside. We wanted to believe there was a world we would want to have a future in.

Without some external authority to push us into the appropriate goal chasing behavior (and discipline us into proper adjustment to society), we had only ourselves to fall back on. So we searched within and found our feelings, allowing them be our guides. Feelings became accepted as a legitimate reason for doing things.

Our minds were closed to reason at the outset. We didn't want to be realistic; we wanted to be happy. No matter how logical or rational any proposal promised to be, we couldn't follow it unless our hearts were in it, too. We sensed that inner truth could be accessed through feelings. We already had enough unhappy experiences in doing what we THOUGHT was best; now we wanted to do what we FELT was best. Some people thought the war in Viet Nam was right, but how many honestly felt it was right? Swayed by strong feelings, some youths relinquished their ability to be objective and impersonal.

We no longer believed thinking alone could solve anything. There were no absolute answers to hope for, only situational compromises. So we pondered away the boredom of our days, exaggerating old problems and creating new ones. Each person must work out his own destiny and solve his own doubt.

Feeling became the demigod of an anti-intellectual sub-culture. Seeking to enjoy life and relieve the oppressing boredom of inactivity, my friends turned to temporary pleasures such as sex, drugs, wine, and music, almost to the point of hedonism. Attempting to escape from themselves and from a hopeless world, at least for a while they forgot about having to decide what to do this day, every day, and for the rest of their lives. Enjoy today, repress yesterday, and avoid thinking about tomorrow until tomorrow comes.

The nature of life is problematic, and merely being alive necessitates certain choices and decisions. I think Sartre meant this when he said, "We are condemned to freedom." A minimum of structure and routine is needed to maintain sanity. With no one to help organize our lives into a semblance of order, we need the inner strength or self-discipline to do it ourselves.

This was the predicament of my friend Liz: she had neither the strength nor the discipline to create a life for herself. Cultural standards had limited her choices to "acceptable" alternatives, approved of by the mainstream, and approved of by her parents. When she broke free from the prison of convention, Liz was overwhelmed with innumerable choices and possibilities. She had to face them on her own, with neither faith nor reason to rely on. Her feelings, too, were undependable; they couldn't make up their minds either. Her life lost all direction. She floundered around, fearing she might end up living on the streets.

Years later, I saw her after I returned home to the East Coast. She was still as confused as ever regarding how to live her life. She told me what had happened: her parents committed her to a mental hospital called Belleview where she was subjected to electric shock treatments. Liz continued to be uncertain and ungrounded, not knowing which way to go.

Simple answers for confused thinkers assaulted our minds via television advertising and programs inculcating social values. I grew up watching lots of television and was shocked to later realize that I had been brainwashed. My innocent child-mind had been programmed to believe in a world that did not exist. I had been deceived. That feeling of betrayal fed my anger at "The System." My inborn sense of morality valued the truth above all else.

I was outraged by the revelation that society was based on lies. Hence the advice of Tim Leary to drop out:

*Turn on  
Tune in  
Drop out*

My rejection of the working world engendered a kind of voluntary poverty. Preferred is the simple life. Poverty is freedom from the demands unneeded possessions incessantly make upon one's time and pocketbook. Poverty is the freedom to be oneself.

Poverty was a choice, and an expression of defiance among young people. "You can't tell us what's good for us. We have to find out for ourselves. Nobody can teach us how to live."

*Everything has been figured out, except how to live.*  
Jean-Paul Sartre

We would rather make our own mistakes and suffer the consequences than take someone else's word for it. Our lives are our own business, even if we decide to do something supposedly harmful to ourselves. We don't tell the rest of society how to behave, so why don't they stop criticizing us and leave us alone?"

Non-conformity became a way of life. We wanted to be individually human.

*Well, I try my best to be just like I am,  
But everybody wants you to be just like them.*  
Bob Dylan

And then there are those who don't fit into the schema of non-conformity – the mad ones. What matter one's own insanity if the world itself is absurd? Madness is equated with being turned on. It is *the way to be alive.*

*The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones  
who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved,  
desirous of everything at the same time,  
the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing,  
but burn, burn like fabulous roman candles exploding like  
spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue*

*centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!"*  
Jack Kerouac, On the Road

Perhaps the mad ones are the hope of the future, along with the radicals, the dropouts, the exiles and the runaways, all the alienated and disaffected segments of society. They are the new waves of immigrants that have swept into the slums of the Lower East Side, infiltrating the old community of Chasidic Jews, Rumanians, Ukrainians, Puerto Ricans, and Negroes. They are forming the new East Village, a haven for all seeking the whole-hearted freedom to be themselves.

## Afterword

I let go of nihilism after I graduated from college and fell in love with a man who inspired me. We lived out in nature, which healed my disillusionment. I was awed by the beauty of Creation and recognized there was a Higher Power behind all things. My search for meaning transformed into a quest to discover the Truth of God. I found that ultimate answers lie beyond the mind and are discovered in the innate intelligence of the Heart.

My academic education developed many powers of the mind, but I needed to experience life directly to know and feel the magnitude of my heart's capacity. I believe life is a testing ground to teach us to keep our hearts open.

If we as humanity made a shift from the mind to the heart, everything would change. A whole new world would begin. People would make choices based on love, a unifying force, rather than *Me first!* Peace on Earth is possible when humanity comes from the heart.

I believe each person is capable of discovering truth within themselves. It is our true nature to do so. When we discover the truth within ourselves, we cannot be victims of the mind games of "The "Controllers." We are free.