

1968: A Summer of Discontent

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1968 was about race and rights, primarily the civil rights of African Americans and women. 1968 was also about war, revolt, and backlash that defined a generation and had a lasting impact on our nation. And it was a year of assassinations and riots as pent up frustrations boiled over on campuses and in streets from New York to Los Angeles; in Washington, Baltimore, Louisville, and, of course, in Chicago.

The course of history took an unexpected turn in 1968: among the many, many transformational events was that three men orbited the moon and returned safely to earth. There was a sense that something huge was happening and that the world we knew was about to change.

Jim Lovell, one of three men aboard Apollo 8, said the experience of seeing earth from a distance of 240,000 miles changed him. “When you see the earth from the moon,” he said, “you realize how fragile it is and just how limited the resources are. We’re all astronauts on this spaceship Earth...and we have to work and live together.”

That’s a very Ethical Culture theme that I will be returning to.

As part of my research for this morning I watched a video of Tom Brokaw at the Atlanta Press Club where he spoke last December while promoting his new book, *Boom! Voices of the Sixties*. He had an interesting way of defining that decade culturally as spanning the period from late-1963 to mid-1974.

There’s more than a little justification for that. When we remember or look back on “the sixties” we don’t often think of the bucolic first few years, but we do often think of a war and other national tribulations that dragged on well into the next numeric decade.

The early sixties were not without challenge and upset. But when compared to other periods in our history, they were relatively calm. Major wars and military actions lay in our past, or so we hopefully thought, believing we had gone from hot to cold confrontations. The national and global economies had recovered from a late-fifties slump and, on the surface, things seemed tranquil, peaceful, even serene.

A new generation was coming of age in America, one more shaped by post-war prosperity and progressive ideas than by the horrors of armed conflict and economic devastation. It was Camelot.

That came to an abrupt and tragic end on the streets of Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963, when a youthful president, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, was cut down by an assassin’s bullets. Much of our innocence, much of our serenity, much of our hope, died with him. And the sixties, as we have come to understand them, had begun.

They continued through turbulent times until the resignation of Richard Milhous Nixon in 1974, the penultimate chapter of a long national ordeal. Right smack in the middle of it all was 1968. And in the middle of 1968 was the summer of our discontent.

The astronauts of Apollo 8, James Lovell, Frank Borman, and William Anders, are just three of the names that define 1968.

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker’s presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

We remember the talent and courageous voices from the arts: Eartha Kitt making anti-war statements at a White House luncheon; Joan Didion on the beads, bongos, and drugs of Haight-Ashbury; *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* of Tom Wolfe; the Smothers Brothers on CBS, and the Smothers Brothers off CBS.

There was the Vietnam War, the Tet Offensive, and the failures of Lyndon Baines Johnson and Robert McNamara.

There were Eugene McCarthy, Hubert Humphrey, Edmund Muskie, Nixon and Agnew, George Wallace, John Lewis, Andrew Young, and Ralph Abernathy.

It was the year of Stokely Carmichael and Black Power; Tommie Smith and John Carlos on the medal stand at the Mexico City Olympics, heads bowed and fists raised.

And in a league of his own, Walter Cronkite played a central and trusted role in bringing us the events from that tragic day in Dallas through the discomfiting end of the Vietnam War.

It was the year that JFK's widow became Jackie O., and it was the year his brother, Robert Francis Kennedy, was assassinated, just two months after the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The names of Sirhan Sirhan and James Earl Ray were etched in the American psyche along side that of Lee Harvey Oswald.

And then came summer and the iconic events surrounding the Democratic National Convention in Chicago: images of Dan Rather being jostled and ejected from the convention, the televised floor antics of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, and who will ever forget the dignity of Julian Bond respectfully declining to be nominated for the Vice Presidency of the United States because he wasn't old enough.

And then there were the riots. Eventually characterized as police riots, they resulted in the brutalization and arrest and trial of hundreds including Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and Tom Hayden of the Chicago Seven. They were the Chicago Eight until Bobby Seale was gagged and bound to his chair in the courtroom, and eventually jailed for contempt by Judge Julius Hoffman.

It was a year of extremes. It was a defining and tumultuous decade, year, and summer that had a lasting impact on our lives and changed the course of our nation.

For those of us old enough to remember 1968, and that's most of us here this morning, it was a watershed year—personally, politically, historically. Change is always hard won and change was certainly in the air in the summer of 1968—the times they were a changin', it was blowin' in the wind.

But what does 1968 have to do with 2008? There are parallels to be drawn: Race, rights, war, discontent. There are lessons to be learned from that defining year that can be of use to us today.

Leading up to 1968, building pressures were overlooked, ignored, or dismissed, until they erupted in revolt and riot. I think there's ample evidence on both the national and global level that we're doing the same thing today. We've been paralyzed by fear and polarized into those for and those against. And those against have been effectively muzzled—we've lost our voice.

Race and rights: Just look at civil and human rights. In 1968 the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had to be reinforced to specifically prohibit discrimination concerning the sale,

rental, and financing of housing. Progress has been made in the intervening four decades but the struggle over human rights continues—those inalienable rights this country has, until recently, promoted and protected.

Not that the victories of 40 years ago are assured. Race still matters to a great number of Americans for reasons good and ill and history is replete with the learning of the same lessons over and over and over again. As George Santayana reminds us, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

We should take heed as today two thirds of high-school seniors couldn’t explain a photo of a sign over a theatre door reading “colored entrance.”

And when compared to their counterparts of four decades ago, only about half as many first-year college students think it is important to keep up with political affairs.

In 1968, we were engaged in a cold war with large and emerging nations, and a hot war in a divided nation in South East Asia. So keeping up with political affairs then meant not being conscripted into a war. A war so overwhelming that it deflated a president, causing him to abandon the office he came to through tragedy but retained in a crushing victory just four years before. So quickly were the fortunes of the mere and the mighty changed in 1968.

Much of the fervor that erupted that summer in Chicago had been fermenting on the nation’s college campuses. Many of the protestors in Grant Park were college students and most all of them were young, at least too young to seek national office.

Police and students had been clashing on campuses across the land all year. Sit-ins and protests disrupted classes. The violent clearing of occupied buildings at Columbia University resulted in 150 injuries and 700 arrests. Eventually the university was forced to close its doors and end the academic year early.

Their frustration and anger, and that of others, erupted in our summer of discontent. Their voices and their actions contributed significantly to the eventual downfall of a president, the end of a war, and the enforcement of civil rights—and so did ours.

Race, rights, war, and discontent. Blatant bigotry, the infringement of human rights and civil liberties, and involvement in an unprovoked and unpopular war were the heady mixture that led to restlessness and remonstrance then, and they are the same things that cause us, four decades later, to rise in opposition.

Our and other voices were strong, united, and influential then and I believe they can rise and be heard once again. Change is again in the air in the United States of America. And I am not talking about the kind of change brought about by political leadership. I am talking about the kind of change brought about by vast numbers of people awakening to what’s right, to what’s just, and to what’s honorable.

Our country has lost its bearings and blundered its way into much the same situation it found itself in in 1968. We have today a deep divide of cultural conflict at home and a war in Iraq that has amazingly mismanaged itself to every mistake that was made in Vietnam. From the false premise of the domino effect used to justify war and invasion in South East Asia to the myth of weapons of mass destruction used as the basis for war, regime change, and preemptive occupation in Iraq, we have erred.

From the delayed, resisted, and lackadaisical assurance of civil rights in the sixties, to the blatant transgression of human rights today, we have erred.

From turning a blind eye to the flagrant racism of the sixties to the failure of moral leadership in the face of genocide and ethnic cleansing today, we have erred.

These were not failures of intelligence, of intent, or of understanding. These were failures of character.

We reacted to the tragic onset of the sixties, to the assassination of President Kennedy, with hushed sorrow, and the world grieved with us. We reacted to the tragic onset of this new era, the unprovoked attacks of 9/11, by unleashing our anger and military might in vengeful ways and the world has condemned us.

We each lost a little bit of ourselves on November 22, 1963, and we each came to some hard realizations when witnessing the summer of our discontent in 1968. We each lost a little bit of ourselves on September 11, 2001, but our nation lost a lot more in its response. It is time we again come to some hard realizations.

America has been, and to a degree remains, the global rule maker. But we don't always play by the rules. We have gone from leadership by example to dominance by force. If we want to again be a moral exemplar for the world, we have to again become a respected part of it.

The world and the world order changed in the last forty years, and are about to change even more. These paragraphs are from an insightful piece by international commentator Fareed Zakaria. Bear with me because what he had to say warrants our attention:

“We are living through the third great power shift in modern history. The first was the rise of the Western world, around the 15th century. It produced the world as we know it now—science and technology, commerce and capitalism, the industrial and agricultural revolutions. It also led to the prolonged political dominance of the nations of the Western world.

“The second shift, which took place in the closing years of the 19th century, was the rise of the United States. Once it industrialized, it soon became the most powerful nation in the world, stronger than any likely combination of other nations. For the last 20 years, America's superpower status in every realm has been largely unchallenged—something that's never happened before in history, at least since the Roman Empire dominated the known world 2,000 years ago. During this Pax Americana, the global economy has accelerated dramatically. And that expansion is the driver behind the third great power shift of the modern age—the rise of the rest.

“At the military and political level, we still live in a unipolar world. But along every other dimension—industrial, financial, social, cultural—the distribution of power is shifting, moving away from American dominance. In terms of war and peace, economics and business, ideals and art, this will produce a landscape that is quite different from the one we have lived in until now—one defined and directed from many places and by many peoples.”

Change surrounds us on nearly every front and we are out of step with much of it and with the rest of the world. While the world moves away from us—some forward, some backward—we are simply marching in place in defense of a bygone status quo and of narrow, often sectarian interests. Just as there are encouraging signs that much of the rest of the world is opening up, we are shutting down.

But while we have lost our ability to dictate to a reordered world, we have not lost our ability to lead. The world of tomorrow will not be a world defined by the decline of America, unless we let it, but rather the rise of everyone else. A rising tide lifts all boats. We, and others from around the world who were and remain progressively driven, have been a magnetic influence on those rising tides. Whether we remain so is up to us.

As we enter this new world, the relationships between the many peoples who will define and direct it takes on added importance. And that's an area where Ethical Culture has something—something essential—to offer. Ours is a lifestance of relationships, of ethical relationships. And it is that perspective that has informed and motivated the many contributions our movement has made to humanity.

And it is the substance of our next great contribution: Understandings that will enable a world of ethical relationships between individuals, between ideologies, between people of varying ethnic, social, and geographic backgrounds, and between nation states.

But before you can have relationships between people you must first have people. And the first step toward that is to stop killing each other. It is pretty difficult to concentrate on the grander aspects of life in the face of nationalistic brutality where the casualties of the other side are not even counted; when lives are taken in barbaric fashion for the slightest slight or offense; when groups of people are slaughtered for no reason other than they have something you want; when it has become fashionable for repressive regimes to massacre hundreds of thousands, if not millions, simply because of their heritage.

That is why the Ethical Movement stands proudly and staunchly in opposition to war, to the death penalty, to genocide, and to ethnic cleansing. It is hard to imagine, in a supposedly civilized world, a situation in which these things can be justified. And yet they continue.

We stand not only for the preservation of life but for the dignity of life. Thus our absolute and unalterable opposition to torture, and our support of human rights and civil liberties for all peoples.

We stand for education, critical thinking, and an open and informed mind as the means by which these things can be affected. The ability to separate fact from fancy is essential. Reliable information is the life blood of civilization, of democracy. Not what you believe to be true, not what you wish to be so, not what you think ought to be the case, but what is actually so—what matches reality.

And we're falling behind in education. The "Head Start" program of the sixties has given way to the controversial "No Child Left Behind" of the 21st century. Head start, left behind. We're losing ground!

Along the way several rungs have been knocked out of the ladder of success. We find ourselves in a socio/educational caste system where those of pedigree and means succeed and those born to want and need stand mired in the muck looking up at something they can't reach. And when people don't see a way out of painful circumstances they grow frustrated and angry, they lose hope.

People at home and around the globe think the Grand Experiment of America may be coming to an end in failure. It was hard in that summer of discontent in 1968—when so much familiar to us was coming unraveled and things we had depended on for generations were no longer dependable—to see a way out, to see any light at all.

And when the situation is hard you have to look hard for solutions. And when you do, you can find optimism in the oddest places. The situation is hard again today. 9/11 jolted us out of isolationist complacency, and the ensuing events have reminded us of our place in the world—a place not held in the same esteem it once was. We are citizens of one world, but we are also individuals from different countries and different cultures. And in that realization we hear the echo of Jim Lovell’s words that “we have to work and live together.”

Forty years after the summer of 1968 we head into the summer of 2008 with the same sense that something huge is happening, that the world as we know it is about to change. We also have the same resolve to stand up for what is right and to stand against what is wrong. And we do so with a cautious but well-founded hope.

Robert Kennedy, who died in that summer of discontent, said, “Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope. Crossing each other from a million different corners of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

Hope is a powerful thing. And it is my most fervent hope that the Ethical Movement in general, and the New York Society for Ethical Culture in particular, once again finds and speaks with the singular voice it once had, stands up and exhibits the ethical ideals so needed and yet so wanting in the world today, and, in accord with its highest moral principles, does its part to move our global culture forward into a new order one in which all people from all places work together with a just and honorable respect so that we may all live together in peace.



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