

SEARCHING FOR THE HIGHER TRUTHS

When I first started to think about this address, I was very keen and excited. My original title was going to be “Growing Up with the Lone Ranger” but my wife, Margaret, didn’t think that was very fitting for a talk in Church so I picked “Seeking the Higher Truths, which of course a lot of this talk concerns. I never dreamed that between the time I gave this title and actually giving this talk, Margaret would suddenly die and many of the greater truths would be reinforced in my mind.

This is a very different talk for me because it is about me and my generation, our search and our roads taken; our story. We are the men and women born between 1930 and 1945 whom the historian William Manchester and the sociologist Gail Sheehy label “The Silent Generation”. My thesis is that although this generation, of course, was influenced by their families, schools, and churches, for many like me, who were raised in urban Canadian and American communities, radio, movies, books and comics played an important part in influencing our behaviour and the adults that we became.

I am going to refer to some of Gail Sheehy’s general description of the Silent Generation taken from her book “Passages Through Time”. I am sure that there are some of you in this audience who are going to enjoy the reminiscences; for others you might learn a little about us.

In this reading Gail Sheehy is actually concentrating on a later cohort group that is closer in spirit to the Boomer generation – those Silent Generation born from 1936 to 1940, my generation. They were children between ages 5 and 9 when the United States dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, and teenagers during the Eisenhower Fifties, and were young adults with children during the Cuban Missile Crisis. If you want to get a feel of the emotional terror of that crisis, rent the movie “13 Days” with Kevin Costner.

They were born of parents who had suffered through the Great Depression which affected many of those parents greatly and as a result, their own children. This cohort was born before television and before credit cards. They grew up without tape decks, artificial hearts, word processors, condominiums, computers, wireless phones, or blackberries and mp3 players. Software wasn’t even a word then, and the girls would not think of touching a mouse. Girls wore letter sweaters, saddle shoes, and bobby socks and accepted corsages from boys who wore coats and ties to school dances. These young people had mostly stay-at-home moms, and sometimes grandparents in the spare room, since it was before day care or nursing homes, And they were so good: drying dishes for their mothers by hand (before dishwashers), hanging up clothes with pins (before clothes dryers), and washing the family car long before they were allowed to drive it. They were told by their parents that if they got into trouble at school, they’d be in bigger trouble when they got home. This was an age of no talking back to your elders, respect and of doing what you were told.

But as adolescents many of them drank too much and drag-raced cars as big as tanks with tail fins. The term rhythm and blues emerged in 1950, quickly followed by the “doo-wop” sound, and suddenly, springing out of the jazz-based music of the Harlem Hamfats, a musical revolution was launched by a southern white boy named Elvis Presley, the King. Boys grew ducktails to mimic Elvis, but they didn’t know about drug raids. In their day, grass was mowed, coke was a cold drink, and pot was something a girl asked for at her bridal shower – preferably in stainless steel. As teens they showed the lowest rates in the 20th century for almost every social pathology of youth: crime, suicide, illegitimate births, and teen unemployment.

In 1960 our cohort group was 20 to 24, the last gasp of a generation that largely respected authority and believed in American institutions and corporate paternalism. This was the earliest marrying and earliest baby-making generation in American history. One of the main draws was sex, which was not allowable outside marriage for “good girls”. Reliable birth control was not available. Many late-adolescent girls stole a brief passion, only to have their lives foreclosed by a “shotgun wedding”. A higher percentage of women in this generation had tied the connubial knot at 19 (42 per cent) than any generation in this century. By the time they reached the age of 24, over one half of Silent Generation males and 70 percent of the females were married.

Women of this generation also hold the record as among the most fertile of the 20th Century. Three quarters of them had already given birth before they reached their mid-twenties and most stayed home to raise their broods. Ultimately 93 % of them became mothers. The women in this five-year-cohort had an average of 2.85 children by age 40 to 44. (The women at the very beginning of the Silent Generation, born between 1931-35, bore a whopping average of 3.17 children”.

William Manchester, the historian, believed the behaviour of these men and women was a phenomenon of the repressive 1950’s. Withdrawn, unimaginative, unadventurous, with no burning causes, they seemed an aberration among youth in America’s history. But Manchester followed them only through their high school and college years, which coincided with the height of McCarthyism in the States, when FBI agents were openly conducting campus security checks and Hollywood screenwriters were intimidated into taking loyalty oaths. Whipped up into paranoia about “Reds under the Bed,” teachers were vigilant about keeping students safe from “Communist propaganda,” while the Catholic Church banned books like *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. The American State Department banned travel in Communist countries and fired career diplomats simply because they knew how to speak Chinese. Fortunately, things weren’t carried to the same fanaticism in Canada

Career opportunities were plentiful, even for the not-so-bright. Since the Silents were the second-smallest American generation in the 20th Century, job competition was mild. Postwar prosperity was in full swing. A big problem for the Silent Generation was staying in school when one could so easily get a job and buy a car. It was rare to be a white male and unemployed. But the occupational history of the Silents was the least colourful of all the generations under comparison. One quarter of the white men in their

early twenties worked as unskilled operators or fabricators. Another one fifth were clerks or salesmen, and a sixth were laborers or service workers.

By the time the Silents reached their early thirties, American society had created masses of white-collar jobs for them, and a shift occurred from unskilled to skilled labor. Business became the most popular vocation, offering the highest return of educational investment. Up to 17 percent of white men became professionals, while almost 23 percent took up skilled crafts, and the ranks of proprietors and middle managers began to swell.

There weren't a lot of expectations that female Silents would turn out to run for Congress or state legislator or mayor or governor. As young women, they watched Grace Kelly and Jacqueline Bouvier abandon their careers to marry older princes.

The lives of this generation were broken up by tremendous discontinuity. The last wave of this generation graduated from college just ahead of the "the fiery Boomer class of 1965". The Silents found themselves grown up just as the world went teenage. They missed the Sexual Revolution, "When nobody over 30 was to be trusted, this group's age was thirty-something." So the Silents had their fling with adolescence in middlecence, creating a surge in divorces and displaced mothers without the skills to support themselves.

Comparing women's lifetime pursuits of education across three generations, Sheehy found a remarkable surge in efforts by Silent Generation women to expand their knowledge after the age of 40. Only 3.2 % of their predecessors in the World War II Generation went back to post-high school between the ages of 40 and 54. But fully 11 % of the Silents went back for some college education in those middle years. In 1991 nearly a million women over 40 were enrolled in college nationwide.

As it turned out, the Silents were not silent at all. Members of this generation were, in fact, the pathbreakers for much of the 1960's –era "raised consciousness" – in music and film, civil rights and women's rights, and multicultural sensitivity – for which Boomers too often claim credit. The Silent Generation produced virtually every major figure in the modern civil rights movement—from Martin Luther King, Jr., to Malcolm X to Cesar Chavez. The so-called Silent women accounted for many of the nation's prominent feminists, Fannie Lou Hamer, a founder of the civil rights and feminist movements; Gloria Steinem joined others in bringing anti-Vietnam protest to the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, and was told "no broads." Two years later, Fannie Lou Hamer, Gloria Steinem, and many others formed the National Women's Political Caucus. Never again would women be either "inside" or "outside" the system—they had finally learned the need to be both.

But for the most part, this generation did not come of age angry. Instead, its members developed a highly sensitive social conscience. John F. Kennedy was their icon. A significant number still look upon the Peace Corps in the U.S. and Katimavik in Canada, as a common bond. They also had the concept of women helping other women

as political partners with slogans like “Sisterhood Is Powerful.” That movement found its mature expression in Emily’s List, a fund-raising organization that raised the early money that tripled the number of women in the U.S. Congress and made 1993 the Year of the Woman in politics.

Silents excel at mediating arguments between others and reaching out to people of all cultures, races, ages, and handicaps. They have a tremendous capacity for asking and listening. It’s no accident that among their number are many communicators who set the style for investigative journalism and TV news talk shows. Silents have also produced four decades of top presidential aides but they have never produced a president of their own.”

Now that last comment intrigued me. Did the same thing apply to Canada? So I did my own research and this is what I found: The Silents produced 4 Canadian Prime Ministers:

- Jean Chretien – 1934
- Paul Martin - 1938
- Brian Mulroney - 1939
- Joe Clarke - 1939

That’s my generation. As I said at the beginning, there were in my opinion some very positive and strong influences on us. I remember as a youth listening to those great radio shows, The Lone Ranger, The Shadow, Mr. District Attorney, The Green Hornet, Jack Armstrong, All American Boy – all emphasizing good over evil, helping the less fortunate, being law abiding and good citizens, having compassion, standing up for what is right and just. Our great comics, Red Skelton, Bob Hope and the tight wad Jack Benny helped us laugh The movies and comics and stories just reinforced these behaviours. In Canada in stories we had Canada Jack, Sergeant Preston and Dale King of the Mounties. We had five theatres in downtown St. Catharines. The two on James Street , the Park or Granada and the Centre had double features with serials on Saturdays. The places were crowded with kids and the cost was cheap. Our generation was also influenced by the propaganda of war movies. We were too young to serve in the military, so we bought war stamps at school, collected steel, milkweed pods, and sent clothing overseas.

As young boys we liked the action movies. We preferred our heroes to be kissing their horses not the girls (boy, did that change later). A joke in my later married life, after I came back from horseback riding, Marg would say, “Have you been kissing that horse again?”

Many of these values have stuck with me and my friends our whole lives. Let me give you an example. One summer Marg and I were going to go away from the cottage for a week, so our son, Sandy, a high school science teacher in his late thirties was going to stay with all the dogs at our cottage. Since it is on an island, we have to use a boat. So, being very anal retentive at times, I am told, I was making sure that Sandy knew exactly where all the required marine equipment was in the boat. I was busy showing him where

the life preservers were stored, where the bailing bucket was and Sandy says, “Dad. If I get stopped, I’ll just say to them this is my Dad’s boat and all the equipment is here because my Dad would never break the law!” Quite an endorsement from your son and for my generation. Do you think it’s only me. Here is a comment found on the internet about the Lone Ranger from one of my Silent Generation: “Yeah, maybe it seems corny today but we grew up with some damn good ideals. A lone man leads the fight for justice. Superman had a never ending fight for truth, justice and the American way. Ideals but noble ones. Contrast that to today’s society, or other cultures around the world that think blowing yourself up makes you a hero and martyr. No, it’s only corny to those that don’t know deep down inside, being honest, noble, fair and courageous is the way to be. The Lone Ranger rides again? I get chills. And so do I!

It is said my cohort lived in one of the safest times in our history. Even though a war was going on elsewhere, in North American communities, we could play and walk safely during both day and night – not even locking our doors. I thought there was only one murder during the time I was growing up in St. Catharines but a lawyer friend said there was another one on Facer street where a man killed his next door neighbour. Two murders in that whole time period.

Now, I want to look at the Western movies. The great influence on my life. The Western stories became myths. Unfortunately in our society, this word has developed a derogatory meaning. The real meaning of a myth is a story that teaches about that society’s beliefs and values. Although the actual story is not entirely true, it seems to become true in our minds and we begin to pattern our lives after the heroes’ behaviours and beliefs. Probably most of you had seen the movie actor Robert Mitchum. His son, Chris Mitchum, also involved in movies said this, “A western movie is an American soap opera. You have a good guy, You have a bad guy. Good triumphs over bad. There are very definite battle zones. You do not have victims of society. The worse villain in town is ready to draw a line in the sand and die for what he is doing. They take responsibility for their own actions. That’s it. I think this ended with two films, “The Wild Bunch” and “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid”. I think these two Westerns single-handedly destroyed the Western genre. All of a sudden the bad guys were our heroes. I’ve been riding since I was a teenager. I go all over the country and meet the real cowboys in America. They are constantly asking me when are they going to start making good Westerns, when are they going to stop using vulgar language, and when are they going to start keeping their clothes on. Why do we have to see so much blood?”

It was the western myths that developed the tough, non complaining individual that still exists in some parts of our society. Have you ever been to a rodeo? The bull rider has just spent 8 seconds on a ton of bucking, enraged bull, been thrown off, likely partially stomped on and hurting big time. He’ll drag himself off, hauling his equipment with him with no complaints because he’s a man and he can take it. There was a cartoon illustrating this behaviour. Picture this. Here’s a cowboy who has been thrown off his horse and has landed in rocks; His arm and leg are at funny angles; blood is coming from his head and he’s sprawled there not moving. Nearby is a cowboy sitting on his horse staring at him with a very bored look on his face and he says: “You all right?” The

sprawling cowboy says, “Yep. I’m fine.” My best friend who died of brain cancer 16 years ago was like that. It was so infuriating when he was in the hospital in his last days. His wife had to go the nurses’ station and tell them to keep a check on him because he wouldn’t ask for medication no matter how bad he was hurting. I didn’t say all the things I learned from westerns were good. The Silent Generation Men have finally overcome this attitude and have learned that it is all right to cry and it’s all right to hug.

My westerns have disappeared but the good news is that they have metamorphosed into the modern Science Fiction myths, Star Wars and Star Trek, etc. These movies are carrying on the lessons of the Old West movies; good against bad; good heroes (dressed in white) and villains (dressed in black); and they are keeping their clothes on; lots of action and our heroes only kiss at the end. There is also a suggestion of spirituality with the emphasis on the good force; “Let the force be with you!”

In my search for the greater truths what have I personally found? Notice that I said personally. Everyone has their own truths. Truth often changes even in your lifetime. There is an ancient eastern saying, “God has a thousand faces”. Problems develop when you, when groups, nations, religions say their face is the only face; their truth is the only truth usually prefaced with that their truth comes directly from God. Pretty hard to argue with that. End of discussion.

Are there any absolute truths? Socrates thought so. I’m not sure but I do have a few truths that have survived the test of time and are very important to me.

The first is “Love” This is taught by every major religion.. Love is the force, the energy that is entirely positive. It can change the world. It includes all the positive emotions, like compassion, sympathy, understanding. Although Jesus said, “Love one another” is the greatest commandment – I think we should add to it “...and all the world and all that is in it.” Look at our UU Principles. Love is the foundation of all of them. So love and hug your family and friends for you don’t know how long you or they will be here. Love yourself, for if you don’t love yourself, you can’t love others

Another taught by the religions is “Forgiveness”. This is a tough one because our egos get entangled in it and it can be so hard to do. Yet, if we don’t forgive, it can eat away at you and destroy you

Live in the NOW; live hard and fully; enjoy yourself every day. Do what you want to do. Quit thinking so much of what others will think of you. We are the greatest planners and worriers. We develop daily plans, short term plans, longer term plans, and longer, longer plans; life plans. But the only thing that actually exists is now; The Past is over; the future doesn’t exist. Now I know to be practical, we do have to have some plans. But have you ever noticed how your elaborate plans never come about exactly as you planned.

Develop your own truths. For what you believe in, you become. To develop your own truths, you have to question. Let me just give you the jest of an article in the

Canadian Unitarian, Spring 2008. Maybe some of you have read it already. The author is an UU minister. She says, "If someone asks me if Unitarians believe in Jesus, I say we honour the teachings of the man who began his Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes. From my Unitarian perspective, Jesus could have added one more Beatitude: Blessed are those who question."

It was Jesus' willingness to question, to look deeply into his own tradition, to challenge and to doubt that ultimately shaped his faith. When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God, he wasn't speaking about some future life. He was speaking of a kingdom of equals on earth, a radical vision that came out of his understanding of the Torah and his willingness to question the injustice he saw." End of quote.

Many of The Silent Generation as they matured, experienced life, read more, studied on their own or went on to higher education and began to question. We found that much what had been told to us was not so, was not exactly right. Many of us began to silently or openly question and it changed many of us.

But to question may come at a high cost especially if you are questioning society's mores or religious ideas. You could be ostracized by your group of friends, shunned by your religion, rejected by your family or even in some cultures put to death. That is why so many people who find the Unitarian Church feel so blessed because they have found a community that welcomes seekers with open arms.

There are other higher truths that I am still pondering. Have you heard the advice of being more selfish, just the opposite we were taught to be? Think about that one and maybe we can discuss that some time.

I am going to finish with a very short story. In the latest Reader's Digest, April, was an interview with the CBC host of "The Hour" that follows the 10:00 -11:00 p.m, national news, George Strombouloupoulos. In it, he was asked what did his mother bring to his life philosophy. This is what George said, "My mom is about one thing: COMPASSION. She would say, 'It doesn't matter what you accumulate in life. Be a good guy. Be honest, be humble.' That was her bit.

I say "Bless her!" Sounds like some higher truths to me.