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North America
What was it like in the 1980's

From an historic perspective, the early 1980's undoubtedly began to shape significantly the life-style we experience today. In the tension-filled, disquieting times of that decade, brought on in part by the age of liberalism that preceded it, and by the OPEC cartel, inflation and unemployment marked the economic times as the federal government attempted to cut back its social supports and balance the budget. The crunch was felt in public transportation, school budgets, and public price supports of many kinds. Individuals, seeking to keep up with their historic standard of living engaged in wide-spread strikes throughout the country. Some won gigantic raises which tended to fuel inflation even more.

In the arena of human values, wide-spread tension and fear marked that period of time. President Reagan was shot in an assassination attempt. The mysterious murders of black children in Atlanta was to claim the lives of more than a score before the culprit was caught. Even after the Civil Rights Act of 1954 was almost 20 years old, racial tension was wide-spread, and school de-segregation issues, particularly in the industrial cities of the north, continued to scar the social scene. During that period, too, a new move toward political and religious fundamentalism, the then called "moral majority", assumed and was granted considerable significance. Human values were also tested with respect to reactions to such happenings as the great hispanic, usually illegal influx, and whether or not to have casinos on the broadwalk in Atlantic City.

In the international political arena, Canada was writing a new constitution, and the nation of Poland, then under the socialist sphere, was struggling with severe economic hardship and the rights of its workers to achieve political and economic freedom under the communist yoke. The USA was determined not to allow Russia, through its Cuban and other satellites, to gain a foothold in El Salvador.

Even the Power that controls natural phenomonon was excercising that power as evidenced by the massive eruptions of Mt. St. Helens in the Pacific Northwest. Also draughts returned to parts of the Southwest and to the Northeast reminiscent of the situation in the early "30s" in the Great Plains. The preciousness with respect to how we now treat fresh water was beginning to be experienced as a real scarcity appeared in various regions of the country.

How did people respond to this?

The response of people in the 1980's to their situation had three faces. One was the face of fear in relation to an uncertain future. It was apparent in the public outcry after the three-mile island Nuclear accident and in lessened evening activities as people avoided going out at night.

This face also reflected the fright of seeing an economic depression across our path of prosperity. Books about economic stagnation flooded the market. The prime rate hit a new peak. The slowdown of the economic system in which people could see themselves losing their job or their car and the pessimism reflected in the argument about whether it would take us 20 years to recover from the damage of the four years of Reagan's government or whether it would take four years of Reagan to recover from the damage of the last 20 years all pointed to the fundamental insecurity that the people here are experiencing. This was the first generation of North Americans that expected their children to have lower standard of living than they had.

The second face that reflected the response of the people in the 1980's to their situation was like that of a student learning to live in the world as it is. There was the awe of learning that in China there are no locks on doors and the new seriousness toward learning from other nations like Japan how the West was going to have to change in order to compete economically. There was a new determination to make it while sustaining the essential quality of life. Evident in the executive corridors as people were heard saying "We need to get more from less" In Wayne County, Michigan, the sheriff decided to take less pay so none would be laid-off. With greater unemployment went out the call for greater volunteerism. Young families moved back in with Mom and Dad. People got together more, supported each other. The various sectors of society were driven to work together to resolve social and economic problems. People experimented with new options for their lives and their families. Some decided not to have children or to have smaller families. An increasing number of families with children began to look at alternative forms of education and schooling in preparing their offspring to take up the challenge of living in their time.

The third phase of people's response in the 1980's reflected the struggle to create the new structures of justice while embracing both local and personal implications. This came out of the realization that the problem in the world was not hunger, not even poverty, but justice. That was the issue of starvation in Somalia as well as the trial of the gang of four in China. It was the concern of busing in Chicago as well as political self-determination in El Salvador. People responded to injustice by lending a hand to refugees in Iowa. They wore yellow ribbons for the hostages' release and red, green and black ribbons to symbolize their determination to put an end to the murder of Black children in Atlanta. Whatever else, this reflected a new solidarity in creating a more human world.

What did this mean for people?

In the eighties people in North America saw that the major changes they were experiencing called for a new story of what was really happening. One story that made sense to many was that the times called for new efforts toward conserving basic or traditional values and patterns. Politically this took the form of a reinvigorated conservative force called the Moral Majority. Families sent two or three members out to work in order to maintain their standard of living expectations. They decided to do more for themselves. But while some felt that we should "enjoy the old wine before it was gone", others experienced a fresh impetus and excitement in experimenting with new stylistic forms: an interest in the rural as care for a total ecology, a flowering of concern for physical fitness within a context of holistic health that implied numerous changes in existing dietary and living habits. As people saw the impending difficulties with previous retirement models, they began to experiment widely with early retirement and second and third

career opportunities. This growing body of older people took on the character of a Renaissance of the Elderly as a powerful new resource and factor in society. March music became more popular again and rock stations less dominant on the air waves suggesting a mood of being on the move. The sense of facing common crises drew people together in new ways, almost as if they no longer had the luxury of divisiveness. Some commentators spoke of a shift from the "Me" to the "We" generation. Finally, the story that people were telling themselves ranged from ending with the stoical, "These times are tough, but we'll survive," to the challenge hurled by one of Dr. Seuss' children's books, in which he called for a whole new alphabet "beyond the letter Z" to deal with the wonder-filled reality that was now at hand.

Political

ME & WE

Vaccums.

No voluntarism
No structures for post-high school