

Ordinary

Have ordinary people really become nearly extinct during our lifetime? I remember ordinary people, and I remember there being a lot of ordinary people. If I remember correctly there was nearly an entire nation of ordinary people. I don't remember being an ordinary person myself however. It was rare to meet an unordinary person. For instance, a divorced woman raising her family by herself was not ordinary, it was unusual. I never met a man raising his children by himself until much later in my life, because, according to ordinary people, men were unable to raise children. A family having income problems was not ordinary, it was unusual. Drinking alcohol seemed to be one of our national pastimes even back then but, meeting a member of a family who was an alcoholic was not ordinary, it was unusual. Smoking was very ordinary, and more than 40% of all adult Americans smoked during that ordinary time that I remember.

Smokers smoked everywhere; there were ashtrays at the end of every aisle in Sears, there were ashtrays in doctor's offices, and many times the doctor smoked during your appointment.

Ordinary meant that men worked away from the home and women stayed and worked in the home. Ordinary meant that working a forty-hour week earned a sufficient income to buy a new three-bedroom, two bath house, with a two-car garage in suburbia, usually not far from a major city. The income from one person working was also adequate to afford a decent, working-class living, which consisted of having two cars, decent furniture, a television, and being able to pay the bills while also saving a little money every month. It was a life that was in no way extravagant, but it was not a poor life either.

There were certain rules that the majority of ordinary people followed. Swearing was not allowed almost anywhere and children were forced to put a bar of soap in their mouth as

punishment for swearing. Usually, one time having a bar of soap pushed into your mouth was enough to teach you not to swear. Hats were always removed when going indoors, and if you were wearing a hat and a woman walked to where you were, you immediately removed the hat. If children were sitting in a room and an adult entered the room, the children immediately stood up and greeted that person.

Telephones were originally party-lines, which meant when you used the phone you first listened to make sure no one was already using the line. If someone was using the line you simply hung up immediately, unless it was an emergency, and then you would inform the other person of your emergency and they would hang up. Manners and kindness seemed to be high on the lists of ordinary people. Ordinary people were kind and considerate to other ordinary people, and most people showed off their manners almost all the time.

Neighbors playing card games were normal, and several times a month adults would meet for drinks and to play cards. Rummy, Hearts, Canasta, Poker, and Whist were all popular, and there were always two rules to their socializing, and those two rules were no talking about religion and no talking about politics. Sometimes after a long evening of playing cards the adults would begin to leave, and loud questions like “Do you want another drink for the road?” could be heard being asked. The neighborhood also kept watch on all the children as they played outside, as they walked to and from school, and while there were no Neighborhood Watch signs posted, the neighbors did watch. Sometimes the young children were shocked to hear, for the first time, an adult or adults talk about black people in disparaging ways. But as they heard it more often it became a part of their thought process too. Some of the children didn’t like hearing their parents or other adults disparage others, while other children didn’t mind. Some children adopted their

parent's viewpoints without question, while other children, also without question, didn't adopt their parent's viewpoints.

As televisions became prevalent in more and more homes during the early and mid-fifties, the news could be, and was, disseminated to more and more people. Not only the news but also television shows were broadcast about the lives of ordinary people who were meeting other ordinary people from different backgrounds, different states, and even different ethnicities, thus allowing for a broad segment of society to meet and learn about one another for the first time. Television broadcasting stopped at midnight and came back on at 6am. There were 3 channels available and more got added as the popularity of television increased. Even the advent of advertising on television seemed to be an ordinary progression. It all seemed very ordinary really. Ordinary people doing ordinary things seemed to be how America was for a very long time.

No one seemed to question why the electric train lines were dug up. Ordinary people shrugged their shoulders as if it was some great mystery they could never unravel. In reality it was several companies, GM, Firestone Tire, and Standard Oil of California, who conspired to gain control of transit companies in violation of the law. Electric trains running on steel wheels and steel tracks weren't using rubber tires or gasoline. They succeeded in 25 cities before they were caught. The ordinary people rarely if ever believed that conspiracies were taking place, and instead they believed government was honest and looking after their interests.

Meanwhile, a nuclear bomb was dropped on Frenchman Flat in Nevada on January 27, 1951. Over the next forty years, over 1,000 nuclear explosions were detonated at the site. During the 1950s, the mushroom clouds from the 100 atmospheric tests could be seen from almost 100 miles away. The city of Las Vegas experienced noticeable seismic effects, and the mushroom

clouds, which could be seen from downtown hotels, became tourist attractions. Westerly winds routinely carried the fallout from above-ground nuclear testing directly through St. George, Utah and southern Utah. Increases in cancers, such as leukemia, lymphoma, thyroid cancer, breast cancer, melanoma, bone cancer, brain tumors, and gastrointestinal tract cancers, were reported from the mid-1950s onward. A further 828 nuclear tests were carried out underground. Despite knowing the effects of nuclear fallout, scientists, under the watchful command of the United States government, kept the nuclear tests going.

Probably one of the biggest splits between the Greatest Generation and those that followed was when people began to learn and eventually learned factually through the Freedom of Information Act, that their government, the government they so loved and honored, had lied to them repeatedly. The same government that these same, ordinary people had sacrificed so much for, and in some cases had sacrificed their lives for, had and was still lying to them, brought about a series of minor revolutions. The implicit trust that had been the foundation of American Democracy was broken beyond repair. Money began to openly rule America, and money has not stopped ruling America, nor will it ever stop ruling America, and now the world.

As America began to move to becoming a more inclusive society, fear and anxiety began to quickly develop. The feelings amongst many ordinary people also included anger, apprehension, distrust and insecurity, because they had never known, worked, nor lived beside people of different races. Women began getting hired for jobs that only men had worked at, for as long as they all had known, and there was some anger on both sides. To most people these changes were changing what was ordinary, and what had been accepted as ordinary for generations. Ordinary had worked for an entire generation or more, and many ordinary people didn't want what was working to change.

Many women worked in factories during the second World War, and that brought about a feeling of emancipation for them. The proof was laid bare for all to see that women could and did have a viable place in the workforce of America, and, while it was not easy for many women, they pushed forward and persevered through the challenges before them.

An ordinary past of an entire generation was exchanged for changes almost everywhere, and that was finally when ordinary faced extinction. The generation of ordinary people, mostly blue-collar workers, who went to work, bought what they could afford after having saved enough to buy it, and lived lives that were meaningful to them, began dying. Old age caught up to what is now referred to as the Greatest Generation of ordinary people. The Greatest Generation was known for economic success and technological advancements such as the radio and telephone, but also for the Great Depression and World War 2. Ordinary people were taught some very harsh lessons during their lives, and those lessons they learned they sought to pass down to their children. The lessons they learned included being forced to learn a higher standard of personal responsibility, even as children. They learned modesty and humility by living through the scarcities of the decade long Great Depression. They also learned a work ethic which enabled them to survive during the depression and one world war. Many jobs were physically demanding with long hours. Frugality was learned so literally saving pennies helped families through times of shortage. "Use it up, fix it up, make it do, or do without" was a motto of their time. Commitment was legitimate for these ordinary people. One job and one marriage often lasted a lifetime. Integrity was paramount, as was self-sacrifice.

Astonishingly, 50 million men were registered into the Army during World War 2. 16 million served in the Army, and 2 million men went to Europe. These were ordinary people doing what they thought was best not only for themselves, but for everyone.

It is quite extraordinary to think of an entire generation of people as being ordinary. And while I have not dwelt on the racial or gender injustices, nor the lies and conspiracies that made so many so much money off the backs of the ordinary people that trusted them implicitly, that too seemed to be handled by those ordinary people in a way that was ordinary for them. Most people seemed content to mind their own business and to let others live like they wanted to live. It was ordinary to think and live like that.

Certainly, a lot of bad things got overlooked by the “a man’s home is his castle” outlook. Child and spousal abuse were rarely, if ever, reported. Millions of men returned from the war, and went back to their families or started new families. How so many veterans did so well mentally and emotionally I will never fully understand, except for the fact that many veterans of war relied on their spouses or they relied on other veterans of war to remain strong. Remaining strong was almost a competition, an unspoken competition, but nevertheless a competition, from each veteran’s heart to other veteran’s hearts, to be the best they could be. Wives consoled their sometimes war-broken husbands, probably other wives consoled the abused wives of veterans who would emotionally and physically snap and become violent, and everyone did their best to survive the mental and emotional toll of their generation.

The time the generations before us lived were fraught with deep, existential problems. There was a World War, the Great Depression which lasted for eleven years, and on top of that there was the Cold War between America and Russia, with nuclear proliferation and endless worry and stress. The military was testing nuclear bombs in Nevada, and a nuclear warning system was installed on electric poles across American cities. It was a very long period of time for the citizens of America to be under such intense stress and worry. Born of this generation were a staggering number of children which later became known as the Baby Boomers. Starting in

1946 3.4 million babies were born, and in 1947, another 3.8 million babies were born. The numbers kept rising and 3.9 million babies were born in 1952; followed by more than 4 million babies born every year from 1954 until 1964, when the boom finally tapered off.

Startling enough are the medical studies that have clearly shown the effects of a mother's stress on her unborn baby, and, also, medical studies have shown the long-term effects of deep stress on a child after it is born. Of course, the human body always tries to mitigate negative effects so the placenta helped to filter out the high levels of cortisol to some extent, but the physical, mental, and emotional effects of first the Great Depression, followed by a World War that lasted from 1939 to 1945, would have caused numerous mental and emotional problems. More medical studies since then have shown positive and consistent evidence that maternal mood and caregiving behavior are associated with maternal and offspring cortisol levels. Simply put increased cortisol levels in children is associated with impaired cognitive development.

How would ordinary people know how to cope with such an outcome to their lives? The how, what, and why of their life being literally turned upside for sixteen years, followed by millions of men returning from war, followed by millions of children being born, and needing to be raised securely, is mind boggling. The fact that so many lived and grew up to be upstanding citizens is, by itself, quite a remarkable achievement.

As ordinary people accepted racism as ordinary, many began to question why it even existed, and many vowed to end it. On May 14, 1954, integration in schools began as a result of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, a landmark 1954 Supreme Court ruling that declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional. But in September 1957 the Little Rock Nine, a group of nine black students, enrolled at a formerly all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Their attendance at the school was a

test of *Brown v. Board of Education decision*. On September 4, 1957, the first day of classes at Central High, Governor Orval Faubus called in the Arkansas National Guard to block the Black students' entry into the high school. Later that month, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent in federal troops to escort the Little Rock Nine into the school. It drew national attention to the civil rights movement, and again television brought that news into the living rooms of many.

Ordinary people began to question, and to take part in, the righting of the wrongs their ordinary complacency had affirmed. Television coverage was believed by those who saw it. Television coverage changed America in ways no one foresaw.

As television coverage began reporting the Vietnam War, as television coverage began showing the brutality of white police officers using their batons to beat black demonstrators, and as television began showing demonstrators of all ethnicities being beaten for simply demonstrating against a war or racist conditions they felt were unjust, the pent-up anger and resentment for having been lied to for so long by the government these ordinary people had so completely trusted, literally burst the bubble of American's conforming to whatever their government said. Chaos and riots were seemingly everywhere. National Guardsmen, in an apparent moment of panic, fired 67 shots from M-1 rifles into a crowd of unarmed student demonstrators, who were protesting the Vietnam War. Four students died and another 10 were injured by bullets, and the shooting was reported by television crews.

Film from the Vietnam War staggered the American public as they learned first-hand the war was not going as they had been told, and that American troops were being killed at an alarming rate. The outrage that had begun in the late 1950's and into the 1960's, with writers and poets, and folk and rock singers from across the social spectrum, had grown until it became a national

uprising. Of course, not everyone wanted this change either, and America was thrown in a hate-filled, social confrontation.

Soon though, America pulled out of Vietnam, soon schools began to be integrated, and America seemingly changed forever.

There were still pockets of ordinary people dotted around America, and these pockets of people were of diverse ethnicities. But soon even their communities were forced to take a stand on where they stood in this newly, morally awakened America. Because if being ordinary meant not caring about others being whipped and hung to death, then being ordinary was repulsive to many. If being ordinary meant hating others because of their skin color, religion, or sexual orientation, then being ordinary was repulsive to many. And so great social change began in America. Many people soon realized that these changes could not happen fully until the ordinary elders passed on, because their beliefs that being ordinary was okay was so deeply ingrained nothing except their old age and dying would end that belief.

Human beings do not forget easily. Whether that memory is in the mind, heart, or DNA doesn't matter. The parents who lived through the Great Depression and the second World War passed on their emotional loads to their children. Their children were a part of a new generation which never knew ordinary. Oh, they would use the age-old saying of "this is ordinary for us", but that doesn't really make it ordinary, does it?

Ordinary people existed in the past. Those ordinary people are mostly extinct now. Especially once the internet and social media combined to allow literally everyone more than enough information, both true and false, to foster a strong opinion or opinions. Opinionated people don't seem to even believe facts, nor do they believe that facts matter. Factual proof is compromised by conspiracy theories which many refer to as alternative facts. If ordinary people are sometimes

right and sometimes wrong, and if ordinary people are rarely if ever mean or angry, then it does seem as if ordinary people are mostly extinct now. However, it does seem apropos that the definition of ordinary is this: “not different, special, or unexpected in any way”.

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © September 20th, 2022