

The Exhaustion of Liberalism

by
Ruben Nelson

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

—Proverbs

Will the eighties be more or less turbulent, surprising and stressful than the seventies?

When your first child was born, did you expect that your children would have a better life than your own?

Over the last couple of years, as a planning consultant and speaker, I have been putting these questions to scores of audiences in Canada. The answers are disquieting. They give a very different sense of what is on the minds of Canadians than the one inferred by the speeches and ads of our recent election campaign, or by the spate of turn-of-the-year prophecies for the eighties.

About nine out of ten of us, I would say, expect the eighties to be *significantly* more stressful than the seventies. On a scale of 0 to 10, on which 0 indicates tranquility; 5, no change from the seventies; and 10 that all hell will break loose, the average response has been between 7 and 8.5.

The answer to the second question swings by age. Fully 85% of those who had children before about 1960 shared the expectation when their first child was born that life would be better for their children. For younger parents the figures are reversed. Only 15% of them expect the future to be better for their children.

The message is clear. Officially we appear content and we act as if we know what we are doing, but a closer look indicates that increasing numbers of us are less and less sure that the directions in which Canada is moving will guarantee the future which we seek for ourselves and for our children.

This explains why we vote without conviction, why all political parties feel the same, and why our leaders are impotent. They do not move us because they distract us from the reality of our experience and

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expectations. They deal with us as if life can be lived from the outside, and as if the good life can be captured by strategies and programs and delivered by governments, all without reference to the reality of lived experience.

This is seen in the way our leaders encourage us to think about the energy question. The emphasis from all of them is on what "they" would do to keep prices down, to increase supply and keep our society going. Yet deep within us, we sense that the energy issue is not a matter of price or even supply. We sense we need to deal with energy on the demand side; that the key to the energy crises lies in a change of life style. Yet no political leader is willing to talk to us about the way we live and its relationship to energy.

The concerns of the politicians in the campaign were much the same as those of the decade-end prophets. Most experts and futurists focus on technology, economic statistics, and the shape of the automobile in 2008. They assume that if the Gross National Product and technological invention go well, then so will the nation. They ignore what it will be like to *live* through the future.

Consider all those articles which reviewed the seventies and forecast the eighties—in *Macleans*, *Fortune*, *The Globe and Mail* and *Canadian Business*. The focus and tone were the same. Technology and the economy were in the forefront. All assumed that the most critical factors shaping our futures are external.

Life As We Will Live It

The point is, when we as persons look back on our lives or forward to the future, we focus on life as lived and experienced. We do not focus on new innovations in technology, the average increase in the Consumer Price Index, or the Gross National Product. Rather, what is important to us is the quality and rhythms of our relations with those we know and love, including ourselves. We sense that if these things are secure, we can handle anything.

Accordingly, the eighties will not only surprise us, they will stun us.

In the eighties, we will discover the importance of lived experience and re-discover that living well is not a function of "command over goods and services" as our economists tell us, but a function of living well—living life from the inside out with integrity.

We will recognize that all of the talk of change—economic, technological and organizational—has been premised on the unconscious assumption that the fundamental habits of head, heart, and hand which we have been refining for the last 500 years in Western Europe and North America are reliable guides to the future, and therefore can still safely be assumed and acted upon. We will recognize what many of us already suspect—namely, that this is a naive assumption.

We will recognize that the change we are experiencing and are caught in is far more profound than we previously thought, or that our leaders have led us to believe.

Officially, we deny all this. Officially we are still "progressive liberals."

Living well means having more, and, like Avis, trying harder. In the recent election campaign there was no hint from any major party that we face substantial disorientation and distress. The worst that we were offered was pain today for jam tomorrow, and even this was ridiculed by two of three major parties.

Privately, however, we have begun to change. Who among us expects an early return to steady 5% growth, as successive finance ministers promised us through the seventies? Who believes that inflation will be "wrestled to the ground?" Who believes a "no" vote in the Quebec referendum, or even the election of Claude Ryan, will mark "the death of separatism"? Who still believes that there will, or should be, a real increase in purchasing power every year, as a matter of right?

The real challenge of the eighties is not to suppress these discoveries from ourselves. We gain nothing by becoming so repressive that we are fearful of our own experience and that of our neighbor. Humpty Dumpty has already fallen and cannot be put back together, regardless of how oppressive or effective the authority. In short, the eighties will see the death of liberalism.

I am not suggesting that most Canadians—or even most futurists—recognize my vision of the eighties as plausible and likely. Quite the reverse. Presently in Canada there is little sustained public discussion about the need for or the nature of the re-formulations which would enhance our future. The sense that the world is changing around us in ways which are too profound for us to easily understand is dim among us and totally unacceptable as an operating premise in our institutions, be they government departments, hospitals, churches or even our universities. Rather, virtually all our institutions operate on the premise that if only we had a few more man-years, a little more money, a bit more equipment, a few more students, then all would be well. True, the progressives among us recognize that there is need for more and better executive education and staff training, but even they do not suspect that something is fundamentally out of whack, with the possible exception of the fact that we appear to be running out of money.

As a society, we presume that if we have a problem it can be dealt with by more information, by more data, by new techniques, by more schooling, by more education and training. That this is so can be seen in every major institution in Canada, from the types of people we hire, in the forms by which we are organized, in the task forces we appoint, in the experts we consult. But this very activity presumes that the foundations of our lives are secure, and that we are troubled because we have not extended our intelligence consistently enough, with rigor. It is virtually beyond us to consider that the roots of our trouble are very deep within us, that our deepest understandings are inherently deluding, distorting and misshaping. It is beyond us to think that as the old joke goes, if we really do seek a sane society, given the way that we insist on travelling, we can't get there from here. We, like Aristotle, find it beyond our comprehension to consider the clue offered to us by Old Testament prophets—namely, that the deepest source

of stress in human life arises from the distortion of our preconscious understanding, from the corruption of our consciousness and our imagination.

Living Our Lives "From the Inside Out"

My point is simple: The messages conveyed by our dominant institutions—the media, our political and business leaders, our universities, and our experts—distract us from understanding the reality and importance of living our lives from the inside out. Even most career planning is becoming the crafty manipulation of one's self and one's life, as if it were an external object, rather than as if one's life is something to be lived. Career success and living well have become disjointed. Even worse, for many, the latter has been collapsed into the former. To test this assertion, consider how seldom the efforts of personnel officers and career counsellors are directed to your genuine psychological independence from the organization, including the capacity to say no to those in authority. As with the Mounties, nobody says no. It could cost you your job. Few notice that we have confused loyalty with the impotence that comes from dependence.

Given our fixation on things that are external and measurable, we are ill-equipped to understand, let alone deal with, the future. This is so because the eighties will be a time of such fundamental shifts of perception that no government will be able to ignore or resist, much less control, their momentum.

One indication that the transformation has already begun may be seen in the way Canadians now complete the sentence: "We live _____ the earth."

One is tempted to fill in the blank with *on*. Twenty years ago this would have been the only answer. Now increasing numbers say *in*, or *with*, or *for*. The change of preposition is revolutionary. It marks the end of liberalism and the industrial age. It marks the end of our sense that we are independent of both the earth and one another. It marks the recognition that, rather than being separate and self-contained entities, with no essential relationship to one another (witness the classic phrase of British empiricism—"a thing is what it is and is no other"), we are inherently relational creatures whose character is a function of the relationships we enter and which enter us.

Today we still plead with each other to "have relationships," as if they are optional. Tomorrow, we will plead with each other to recognize the relationships we have, whether we see them or not.

Once we discover the reality and centrality of relationships as an empirical rather than a moral matter, a liberal and therefore industrial view of life can no longer be sustained.

The shift is even reflected in today's Sunday School hymns. Children used to be taught that they were bade to shine, "you in your small corner and I in mine." The implication is clear: The Holy Spirit works like Adam Smith's guiding hand, bringing wholeness to our individual efforts. Now children sing that they are "drops of water in a mighty ocean," and that they are "sons and daughters of one life."

Our Present Transformation

The transformation we are experiencing can be seen in our present dissatisfaction with government and our willingness to re-evaluate its role in our lives, though none of the systems analysts or policy experts we hired by the truckload in the seventies predicted it. The re-evaluation is driven not by rational argument, but by a gut feeling that our governments are misusing and betraying us. Nothing short of insisting that they stop will do. That liberal intellectuals disdain this passion and anxiety is no reason to disown it. The tragedy is not the so-called neo-conservative feeling, but how little our intellectual opinion leaders help us to understand the changes occurring within us.

The key to understanding the future is to understand that fundamental shifts in orientation change what makes sense to us and what does not. This is the essence of the revolution. Not only our values but our sense of reality is changing. Arguments based on the old realities are not so much invalid as uninteresting. This is true of women's changed perception of their nature, role, and status, of francophone Québécois determination never again to be led or coerced into seeing themselves as a people who need to apologize for their life together, or the assertion by blacks of their rooted character and identity, and of the revolution in Iran.

Iran is pertinent. Our ideas about that society were so superficial that *Time* magazine was assuring us in November of 1978 that the Shah's throne was secure. Three months later he was gone. Leaders and newswriters encouraged us to think of events in Iran as "surprising," "unpredictable," "unreal." Last May, the Planning Executives Institute—the largest organization of corporate planners in North America—was assured at its annual meeting in Montreal that events in Iran were not only surprising, but unpredictable. The implication was clear: no planner could be held accountable for the losses suffered by their firms.

The essential shape of the Iranian revolution, however, was both predictable and in fact predicted. But those who understand what Western influences were doing to Iranian society—our historians of religion—are not persons with whom corporate planners or other experts normally converse.

In Canada in the eighties, I see a significant number of Canadians coming to insist that *their* new sense of the importance of their own experience and of the reality of their relationships to one another, to society, and to the earth be reflected in the way society works. The reworking of all our social forms in these terms is the basic task of the next several generations.

But in the near term, the eighties will have more to do with the exhaustion of the 18th and 19th century notions by which we have lived than with the clear articulation of new notions to replace them. It will be a time of withdrawing belief from established order, rather than of creating new order. We will move into the wilderness—giving up what we have known because it is too painful to stay—without

much sense of the shape of the promised land. The eighties will be messy, tumultuous and, for some, dangerous. Our psychological unpreparedness for all this is the main source of the danger. We will be tempted to deny change. We will continue to think that reform does not mean re-forming.

Denial can be seen in the still-common resistance of males to the women's movements. It can be seen in the response to Québec over the last 20 years: to this day, Pierre Elliott Trudeau encourages us to understand the Parti Québécois and René Lévesque as embodiments of evil, a threat, rather than as an understandable expression of a people regaining their self-confidence. He encourages us to believe that calling up the troops can deny this new reality.

I think, in the long run, we will come to the conclusion that our leaders in the sixties and seventies betrayed us by focussing our attention on appeasing Québec—what does Québec want? We in the English-speaking community were not encouraged to understand and wrestle with the changes which were occurring within us, so that we would have a similar experience of transformation and renewal, with its tensions, threats and joy.

True, there is a new realism in the land, a new sobriety. We sense that reality is more resistant to our good will than we had believed. The easy expectations of the early Trudeau years—the notion that all problems could be handled by the application of money, effort, rationality and systems—are now sensed to be unwarranted and naive.

Yet many people have the feeling that not only is the roof falling in—rising energy, food and housing costs—but also the bottom is falling out, with no ground of commitment from which to develop new directions.

No Vision to Guide Us

The thought is occurring among more and more of us that our problem is not merely that we lack able administration, but that we have no common purpose, no common directions, no vision to guide us as we venture into the wilderness. Nothing to which we can commit ourselves, nothing that we can embrace which will make enough sense of our lives to keep us going.

This was vividly caught by Thomas Berry when he said:

It's all a question of story. We are in trouble now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The Old Story—the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it—is not functioning properly, and we have not learned the New Story. The Old Story sustained us for a long period of time. It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with life purpose, energized action, consecrated suffering, integrated knowledge, and guided education. We awoke in the morning and knew where we were. We could answer the questions of our children. We could identify crime, punish criminals. Everything was taken care of because the story was there. It did not make men good. It did not take away the pains and stupidities of life, or make for unflinching warmth in human association, but it did provide a context in which life could function in a meaningful manner.

Irving Kristol has made the point that 100 years ago the present juncture would have been called a "spiritual crisis," rather than a "crisis of values." Our common use of the second term gives the sense that the crisis is external to us, that we can make rational decisions about new values and then manipulate our way to the future, without cost to ourselves. But in our spiritual crisis, we are vulnerable in the face of the spirits among us. The specter of Jonestown is a parable of our times. Kristol is pressing us to recognize that we cannot have a vision merely because we see one is needed.

Hence, the absurdity of Pierre Trudeau's proposal that the disorientation which is common among Canadians can be dealt with by an explicit preamble in a new constitution—namely, a statement of goals for Canada. We sense, even if we have not the courage to say it, that such a statement would be like ads for Canada Day—apparently impressive, hard to argue against, but finally not only to no effect but further distracting and corrupting, for it promises us a sense of life without risk and vulnerability.

If I am right, the eighties will be profoundly unsettling. As we enter the eighties, given our present leaders and the present conceptual frameworks within which we work, we are as naked as lambs before wolves. We will find ourselves living without conviction, which, of course, will destroy the possibility of respecting ourselves, let alone our neighbor. In short, we seem to have chosen a strategy which is necessarily self-defeating.

The alternative is not flashy, but it offers some possibility of hope. The alternative is to begin to do now what we have refused to do for the last 20 years. The alternative is to begin to take seriously that the conversations that more and more of us are having with ourselves are not only personally but socially significant. We must learn to face this and to talk with each other.

If one has a deep respect for life as lived from the inside, then no other road is possible. In a time of turmoil, there is no way to put down roots which are sufficiently common and potent other than by learning to talk with each other as people before a fire. After all, what is there to do in the wilderness, except pull up a rock and talk with each other?

It may not appear much, but I know of no other activity which is as revolutionary or as healing as the creation of friendships within which we talk with each other about what really matters to us. The fact that this appears in none of our management manuals or courses on policy analysis may suggest that I am a fool. It may also suggest the depth of the confusion in which we have trapped ourselves.