

Memo to Myself

GEORGE L. FERSH

I ADMIT this will be mostly a one-sided, personal view which I could demolish or diminish with contrary examples, but I am developing it as much-needed therapy for myself. I am a middle-aged fogey who has decided to sum up what there is to be pleased about in the happenings of our time.

What about my children and other young people? Now that I think about it, I really like the zip and surprises in what they wear and what they do with their natural endowments, hair and all. The variety of colors, patterns, costumes, and materials is exhilarating and refreshing. I am pleased that they are forcing more people to consider what one is, says, and does rather than what one looks like or pretends to be. For most of my life, I have questioned inwardly what was going on and I rejoice that they are speaking out about much that has concerned me and now bothers them. Their taste and sound in music repelled me at first, but now I must admit I am intrigued by their inventiveness and obvious sincerity.

Another cause for anxiety and sometimes general despair among middle-agers is what is happening among the blacks. Here, too, much of this change gratifies me as I reflect upon it. I am pleased to see the increasing compassion the middle-class blacks have toward the slum-dwellers, and their obvious pride in their young black leaders in the arts, education, and government. It is good to see black men gain stature in the eyes of their mates by acts of physical courage and material sacrifice, and for all blacks to gain confidence in their ability to cooperate or compete with whites. Their increasing pride and comfort in being themselves, "doing their thing," and focusing on their assets make me more comfortable. I applaud the deserved and long overdue rights that have been gained to improve the role and status of blacks as leaders and participants in political, economic, and social affairs. Now they can begin to share, in their own ways, in experiences, deliberations, and the work of building a better life for all of us.

As I think about the fields of education and economics, which are my prime career responsibilities, I find a great deal to applaud. The pressures for relevance in what is taught, and for competence in how we teach, are certainly welcome. So also is the awakened interest from teachers and students in the formulation of educational goals and policies. The evaluation from outside and from within boards of education, trustees, and administrative councils of their role and performance is a giant step forward. So is the increasing competition for positions within such groups.

Willingness to capitalize on the potentials of new tools and techniques and the determination to improve research in education have my complete approval. Strengthened alliances of education with the disciplines of psychology and anthropology are providing valuable insights into the nature of learning, particularly the importance of the formative years, and the benefits from such cooperation foster optimism. The pioneering efforts to apply a systems approach to the overall and inner workings of our educational system are provocative and constructive. I am pleased with the way we are opening educational vistas for all students and I am also pleased with the trend toward bringing better balance between specialization and general education, and between education for needed occupations and education for professional careers.

And what is happening in the economy? I am pleased that more people are questioning and rebelling against "economic growth" as a virtue apart from the "bads" we are producing as a result of this growth. It is gratifying that more of our people believe harmful ups and downs in the economy are not inevitable and that they accept shared responsibility among all sectors of the economy and the government for both causing and treating booms and busts. I like the way our economy has harnessed science and technology to make fuller use of resources and to bring greater efficiency into operation.

I am also pleased to see growing recognition of the need to anticipate the consequences on our economy of scientific and technological developments and for sharing responsibility to assist those who are disadvantaged by such developments. I am heartened whenever I see evidence that consumers, workers, or employers are being safeguarded from exploitation, and while exploitation is not being eliminated as rapidly or thoroughly as it might be, there is satisfaction in knowing that those who take advantage of others are subject to increasing scrutiny and disapproval. The ethical introspection among our economic leaders is also gratifying. I applaud their entry into public deliberations and actions to deal with such problems as inadequate manpower and natural resources, inefficient transportation, outmoded devices, and regulations for safeguarding our health and safety.

And for the record, I like the wide array of choices in goods and services our economy now makes available. There were comforts and joys in my youth that are now gone, but I must admit life would have been improved by the central heating, air-conditioning, and transportation we now have. I am also pleased to be among an increasing number of salaried people whose financial situation has been improved by being able to own shares of dynamic economic enterprises either directly or indirectly.

What are the satisfactions in what is happening in the political structure? Certainly I am delighted when so many of our people are critical of political payoffs and cronyism, which are detrimental to the principles and performance of a representative government. At the same time I am heartened when the legitimate rewards for government employees are increased so that we can benefit from improved standards and performance. The scrutiny of our electoral procedures is commendable, and I am pleased to learn of legislative and citizen groups pushing forward needed reforms. It is gratifying when governmental bodies evaluate their own internal operations and when such procedures as seniority privileges are analyzed and challenged to stand on merit.

Compelling Voices

I find much to please me in what is happening in the communications field. There are increasing hours of reward from selective viewing of commercial and educational television programs. As a youngster without the price for a ticket to the ball game, I never dreamed that the intimacy of all kinds of athletic events would be available free in "living color." I also appreciate the value of having access to on-the-scene radio, television, and newspaper coverage of whatever happens in the world. The crusading spirit is possessed by many of our reporters and journalists so that I have a sense of being represented in the appraisal of what is taking place and what I have a right and responsibility to know about.

What of the opportunities for improved physical well-being and appearance? I give thanks for the medical advances which improve the chances for prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of diseases or disabilities for increasing numbers of people throughout the world. Increased vitality is within reach in our medicine cabinets and foods, and I find it gratifying to see the evidence of how much can be done to improve physical appearance through advances in specialized branches of medicine, surgery, and yes, even cosmetics.

I realize that with all of these benefits and gains I have noted, there are others I have not mentioned which also justify optimism. For example, I hear more compelling voices educating us to the wisdom of taking essential steps to live in harmony with our natural surroundings. There is greater recognition of the need for equating quality of life with a rational approach to the number of people who are now inhabitants of all parts of the earth.

The realities and causes of human differences are becoming better understood, and policies, strategies, and desires for helping those less fortunately endowed or situated are being enunciated more clearly. I am cheered by the exposure and by the correction of injustices. I am aware we should be critical of a social system which permits the aged to live empty lives, but we can at least take heart from social action which provides for their protection from overwhelming medical expenses.

I take heart also at being alive in these times when many long-held beliefs are being examined and found to be illusions. We are coming to recognize that the United States and American values have no "natural right" to dominate others and that military power alone cannot impress or subdue other people; we are freeing ourselves of provincial tastes and egotistic conceptions of our "superiority" and "manifest destiny" to be leaders in all forms of endeavor; and I accept with pleasure the skepticism that age and wisdom necessarily go together or even that "togetherness" is an unquestioned blessing.

I know also that many of the gleams of satisfaction and hope I have been able to draw upon are still unavailable to far too many people. Yet while this is not "the best of all possible worlds," neither is it the worst. Somehow I feel stronger from seeing what is right with the world to do more about improving what is wrong.

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