

by Rod Haynes, Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship, July 1, 2018

Last December, with the 50<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of 1968 looming ahead, columnist Katie Reily of TIME magazine wrote: "It was a year marked by a racially coded law-and-order campaign pitted against a fierce social-justice resistance, the unrest and defiance of a "troubled and troublesome" young generation, questions about gun control in the wake of devastating violence, and the "fear and frustration and anger" that defined a presidential election. 1968 saw the election of Richard Nixon; the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy; and widespread protests against racism, sexism and the Vietnam War. Ahead of the 50th anniversaries of those world-shaking events, the questions and concerns that then drove the national conversation remain strikingly relevant." Are we experiencing déjà vu all over again?

In 1968 my 12-year-old world was largely about baseball, including playing the game and enjoying the occasional outings to Fenway Park, Boston. My Boston Red Sox had shocked everyone by coming within one game of winning the 1967 World Series the previous October. This year the team had reverted to its old, familiar, mediocre self. I was more and more interested, in a detached kind of way, in tracking world current events beyond my northern RI village of Limerock, through Walter Cronkite, who appeared nightly on our scratchy black and white "idiot box," as my mother liked to call it, in our living room. We also took daily delivery of the Providence Journal – Evening Bulletin. I made it a point of being the first in the family to grab our weekly edition of LIFE magazine from the hopelessly dented green-paint flecked mail box leaning precariously over the hardtop of Wilbur Road.

In 1968 my 14-year-old sister Jen did not ask my parents' permission to decorate the inside-door of her bedroom. 50 years later the door still speaks of her love of the television comedy show LAUGH-IN, Charles Schulz's Peanuts comic strip, and simply having fun. I am surprised Jen didn't include the face of her idol Davey Jones, the lead singer of the Monkees in the door's design. In those days Jen's world was all about Tigerbeat magazine, art, and laughter and gossip about boys on our one telephone in the kitchen. She was born on Christmas Day, 1953. Ten days after I was born in November of 1955, our family moved into an old, creaky, former colonial school house in the village of Limerock RI. It stood up high on a hill overlooking Henry Jordan's

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dairy farm. I remember my mother grabbing a broom and battling the moo-cows who'd found holes in the barbed wire fence at the edge of our property out back, invading our vegetable garden just as the crops were ripening. This happened every July, like clockwork. My friends and I considered watching Mom battle those wayward bovines first-rate entertainment.

In January 1968, right around the time Jen was painting her door America was receiving live news reports from Southeast Asia, from a youthful Dan Rather donning an army helmet, staring into the camera, clearly rattled, saying that something very wrong was happening not only around the American Embassy in downtown Saigon, but in many other parts of the embattled country. The Tet Offensive very quickly represented everything that was wrong with America's ramping up troop levels to over 500,000 inside Vietnam by the end of 1968. Body count reports came much more regularly from Cronkite and from LIFE magazine. One recent estimate is that over 830,000 homes in South Vietnam were destroyed and over 82,000 lives were lost in the Tet Offensive alone. The troubles worsened when, in March, a former used car salesman from Georgia turned U.S. Army second Lieutenant named William Calley, led a brutal assault on a rural hamlet called My Lai, his troops indiscriminately shooting over 350 civilians claiming they were harboring or abetting the Viet Cong. LIFE magazine covers quickly showed dozens of bloated bodies in ditches and horrific photos of terrified victims moments before they were killed. It slowly dawned on my parents and most of American society that what the government and military was telling the American public did not exactly jive with what our eyes and ears told us was going on. High-ranking Army generals had announced the enemy's strategy with the Tet Offensive had failed miserably. It was true many thousands of Ho Chin Minh's "liberators" *had* died, but those losses brought Ho a great propaganda victory, sowing serious doubt among American families like mine.

The war wasn't the only point of contention between young and old, conservative and liberal, black and white, rich and poor in 1968. Just when President Johnson shocked the nation by announcing he would not seek a second term, in the first week of April came news that Martin Luther King, a leader I knew through LIFE magazine, was shot and killed standing on a balcony of a Memphis hotel. Within hours cities throughout America erupted in flames. As Cronkite soberly reported on the rioting in LA and Detroit and Washington DC and Boston and elsewhere,

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Dad and Mom said that, “black people in our country are very angry right now.” The Journal reported that South Providence was burning in the summer of 1968, the last summer of my childhood, but no one in the make-believe world of Limerock, Rhode Island paid much attention. Eddie Dunlap was a member of one of three black families I believe resided in Limerock in 1968. His Dad was a marine pilot in Narragansett Bay. I’d known Eddie since the first grade, spending almost every waking hour together with him since then, either at his house, at mine, or in the fields and woods of Limerock. Eddie introduced me to Bob Dylan and Jackie Stewart of Formula One car-racing fame. I tried to get him excited about the Red Sox and tracing Civil War battles on translucent white paper, but he wasn’t interested. Still, we remained fast friends through high school.

The gang of kids Eddie and I ran with then also caddied for nouveau riche mobsters dressed in white shoes and white belts at the Kirkbrae Country Club less than a mile from the house. We played baseball behind the Limerock Firestation on an oddly-rectangular field that barely resembled a traditional baseball diamond. And then there was Grandfathers, a penny candy store less than 100 yards from home plate, where we paid ten cents for a cold bottle of birch or lime or cream-flavored soda. A quarter could get you a sack full of bullseyes, root beer barrels, Pixie Sticks, Turkish Taffy, black or red licorice sticks, red hot dollars, and Mary Jane candy. Or five candy bars, your choice. I was unable to set aside much of my hard-earned caddy profits, thanks to the temptations of Grandfathers.

One Saturday morning at Kirkbrae Country Club three guys in grey suits with white shirts and narrow ties walked onto the seventh tee where I was waiting for my golfers to hit their tee shots. Showing they meant business, these FBI agents flashed badges, while instructing one of the golfers to turn around and put his hands behind his back. They handcuffed him, put him in the back of a golf cart, and right-away drove off towards the clubhouse. It was the kind of slice-of-life scene that belonged in National Lampoon’s 1980s movie CADDY SHACK. As it came down, all I knew was the son-of-a-bitch in handcuffs had stiffed me my \$5.00 pay that day.

It was Friday June 7, 1968. My sister Libby’s eleventh birthday had arrived, but I was busy making plans for a baseball game that morning. School was over, summer vacation had arrived,

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life was great, and I was young. Phones were ringing off the hook all over Limerock at 8:00 am as the word was passed down among my friends that the baseball game was on in an hour. I poured a heaping bowl of Cocoa Puffs and splashed some milk over it, before running out to the mailbox to grab the morning paper. Glancing at the headlines I rushed back into the house and climbed the stairs to the second floor, two at a time, barging into my parents' bedroom, breathlessly announcing the most recent awful news. Bobby Kennedy had been shot in a Los Angeles hotel. My parents collectively groaned, falling back into bed in dismay and disbelief. Bobby lingered briefly before dying from his wounds. The madness continued.

For years my sister Jen alternated between being my hero and my most obnoxious rival. She was an artist, sometimes good-looking, I grudgingly conceded. While I was frequently at odds with Jen, I relied on her routinely bringing joy and laughter and fun into our home. She was also bossy, relishing what I called "finking out," slang for "tattle-taling" to my parents to get me into trouble, then giggling as the wheels of justice rapidly ground me into a pulp. Jen had cystic fibrosis, a chronic lung disease, which back then was an early death sentence. Twice daily Mom pounded Jen's back, then had her breathe for 20 minutes through the oxygen-mist machine that endlessly chugged along, her mouth and nose covered by a plastic mask directing moist air into her weakened, diseased lungs. Those verbal battles with Mom demanding that her oldest daughter follow a strict regimen of back pounding and oxygen-feeding through the face mask were legendary. Jen suffered through two or three major operations. She was 14, temperamental, often at war with the person who was closest to her. My father admired and loved her from a greater distance. They clearly shared something special, a sort of artistic transcendental, unspoken bond only an eldest daughter and her father cherished.

Late July arrived. I was confused by the violent commotion on tv, live from the Democratic convention in Chicago, with young people beating on and being beaten up by, Chicago cops and national guardsmen. An angry, thug of a mayor named Richard Daley, in the middle of the convention crowd inside, was screaming obscenities and threatening more violence against those dirty hippie-agitators rampaging in his streets. One of the rioters was Abbie Hoffman, who through his ridiculous courtroom histrionics, would eventually make quite a name for himself and his Yippie movement, while writing his treatise, STEAL THIS BOOK.

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In early August it came time for me to go to summer camp at Cragged Mountain Farm in central New Hampshire. The curriculum there was limited to hiking, swimming, or canoeing. It was a WASPISH world for kids of Providence doctors, attorneys, and college professors. I loved climbing in the White Mountains, swimming in Loon Lake, canoeing the Allagash River in Maine and diving off the 40-foot high Saco Cliffs just outside North Conway, NH. I temporarily inhabited a free, unfettered natural world far from political unrest, assassinations, and war, near a bucolic little village called Freedom, New Hampshire. I forgot about being annoyed with Jen and the terrible war pictures in LIFE magazine and Walter Cronkite's body count. At summer's end my parents came north to retrieve me. I immediately sensed something was seriously amiss, looking into my father's fearful eyes and my mother's vacant face. My summertime bliss vanished. Five days later my parents drove me up to Boston to see Jen, but I could only stand in a courtyard and look up at a third story window and wave at my sister, who enthusiastically waved back. I learned later that Jen was quite the popular figure in the halls of Children's Hospital, teaching young kids how to draw and paint, to get their minds off their own broken health. This was Jen's special, lasting gift to them.

On September 6, 1968 I was unaware of the demonstrations happening outside the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City. Crowds of agitated women were marching, burning bras, and essentially laying the groundwork for the long road towards social justice for women in this sexist society, a journey that continues today. The following day, September 7, dawned cool, crisp, and sunny. Before breakfast Dad's white Pontiac crunched the stones of the driveway and I looked out to see my mother leaning on my father as they walked mechanically down the hill towards the front door. I ran down the stairs to greet them, nervous and worried. My mother was silently sobbing, and my father looked terrible, with reddening eyes and a bewildered, far away look of pain and anger. All he said was, "Rod your sister Jen died this morning." I made no great demonstration, no loud protests. Instead that morning I sought refuge the only way I knew: I called the gang together to play baseball. My parents agreed it was a good idea. It is now fifty years later and as is the habit of aging people in the fourth quarter of their lives, I am taking stock of what 1968 meant within the context of all that has transpired since then.

<<<BREAK>>>> MOTHER NATURE'S SON lennon & mccartney

In a recently published book entitled TAILSPIN, author Steve Brill suggests over the last half century America has been split into two basic economic classes, the haves and have-nots. He says if the key measures of the nation's public engagement are any indication—indices like voter turnout, knowledge of public policy issues, faith that the next generation will fare better than ours, respect for basic institutions like our government—all are far below what they were in 1968; in many cases they have reached historic lows. John F. Kennedy spoke about seizing the future; today we concern ourselves with merely surviving the present. There is an average of 657 water-main breaks a day in this country, according to Brill. Inflation-adjusted middle-class wages have been nearly frozen for the last four decades, while the earnings of the top 1% have nearly tripled. The recovery of the 2008 crash was reserved almost exclusively for the wealthiest. Although the U.S. remains the world's richest country, it has the third-highest poverty rate among the 35 nations in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), behind only Turkey and Israel. Nearly 1 in 5 American children live in a household the government classifies as “food insecure”: without access to enough food for active, healthy living. Congress has not passed a comprehensive budget on time without omnibus bills since 1994. There are more than 20 registered lobbyists for every member of Congress, most are deployed to block anything that would tax, regulate, or otherwise threaten a deep-pocketed client. The unprotected class—the have nots—need government to help preserve their flimsy way of life and perhaps improve it. Good public schools are needed, level playing fields for small businesses are needed, fairness in consumer disputes, justice in court, and racial justice on the streets. Not only acceptance but embracing all lifestyles in our society. Government needs to ensure a safe workplace, a living wage. We need mass transit systems that work and call centers at Social Security that answer the phone. The protected class have created exotic and risky financial instruments and organized hedge funds that turn owning stock into a minute by minute bet rather than long-term investment. And so in 2016 46% of fed-up Americans turned to a non—politician promising to rebuild cities, block immigrants with a great wall, provide health care for all, make our infrastructure the envy of the world, and cut everybody's taxes.

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In 1968 young and liberal Americans believed they had a vested interest in this country's welfare, getting us out of a needless, bloody war in Southeast Asia, empowering women, calling the country to account for centuries of racial injustice and exploitation, acknowledging how non-mainstream populations in America had forever been shunted aside, ignored, beaten up, or imprisoned. We began considering, just barely, the unconscionable, completely inexcusable harm visited on LGBT populations in America. In 1968 many youth chose dead-end paths like illicit drugs, violence, and dropping out, as Timothy Leary encouraged the disaffected to do. Drug dependency and death by overdose remains at epidemic levels today, with no signs of abating.

So, where am I headed here? In December 1968, a month after America elected Richard Nixon to the presidency and the Beatles issued their White Album, Olympic medal winners American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos stood at the medal ceremony in Mexico City with their raised fists covered in black gloves as the Star-Spangled Banner was played. Americans watching back home were apoplectic, indignant, accusing the men of treason and worse. Smith and Carlos' gesture remains a major point of contention for some in this country today, including the current president, who suggests professional sports players honoring these past-Olympic heroes' message of racial oppression are ingrates, they are un-American. In short, the President is acting no different than large numbers of Americans did in 1968, rejecting the ugly, searing truth about race-relations in America right now. Mainstream America continues to tolerate racial profiling, voter suppression, indiscriminate shootings of law-abiding black citizens by law enforcement authorities, and the popularity of race-baiting politics put forth by the current administration. Fear, anger, and hatred fuel these efforts. A negative energy not unlike 1968's paralyzes us today. We have met an old enemy and he is us.

In closing, Jon Meacham, a highly renowned contemporary historian and prolific writer recently published *THE SOUL OF AMERICA*. His interpretation of current events within the context of American history, I think, helps place 1968 in perspective. Not all is lost, Meacham writes in his introduction: "History shows us that we are frequently vulnerable to fear, bitterness, and strife. The good news is that we have come through such darkness before. . . periods of public dispiritedness are not new and [thus there is] a reassurance that they are survivable . . . . To know

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what has come before is to be armed against despair. If the men and women of the past, with all their flaws and limitations and ambitions and appetites, could press on through ignorance and superstition, racism and sexism, selfishness and greed, to create a freer, stronger nation, then perhaps we, too, can right wrongs and take another step toward that most enchanting and elusive of destinations, a more perfect Union.”

Peace be with you.

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LIFE Magazine  
February 23, 1968

“As I write this my son, my only son, may be wounded or dead in Vietnam. Yet, I know in my heart it is for a cause he truly believes in. I know my son is right.”

Mrs. J. Thomas Furlong  
Lemoyne, Pennsylvania

LIFE Magazine  
October 11, 1968

“Everyone seems so dead set that [George] Wallace has no Negro support. I am a Negro and I would like to set some people straight. We don’t want to be bused around to the white school. We have our own school and we like to run it our way. If the Northern blacks want to mix with the whites—let them have at it, but let the Southerners decide for themselves, also. That is one of the reasons I want Wallace.”

Angeline Cooper  
Texarkana, Texas

LIFE Magazine  
July 19, 1968

“You imply all popular music flies with the Jefferson Airplane, whips with The Cream, slams with the Doors, swims with the Fish, or is Dylan-pickled. A glance at the hit charts of the last few years or an examination of songs by ‘in’ radio stations proves otherwise. Immensely popular songs released by nonpsychedelic artists like Herb Albert, the Cowsills, the Seekers, the Supremes, and Elvis Presley. Pop stations play discs by the Cream and the Righteous Brothers, the Rolling Stones and Bobby Vinton, the Doors and Ronnie Dove, the Who and Otis Redding. ‘New Rock’ does not pervade the entire realm of popular music, and all popular music must not be judged on the basis of one frontier.”

Mark A. Ragan  
Sweeter, Indiana

LIFE Magazine  
March 22, 1968

“After your story on the snowstorm on the Navajo reservation on January 5, I wrote a letter telling of people’s generosity to the Navajos on January 26. I hope that such help would continue. The response from all over the country was spectacular. Between the two Indian centers here, over \$1,000 in cash was received, loads of clothing and several offers of people to do personal work if needed.”

Ammian Lutomsk  
Gallup, New Mexico