

The answer's still blowing in the wind

I don't know how many younger people read newspapers these days, but this commentary is directed at them. Maybe they'll pick it up on our Facebook page.

I'm writing it because this is back to school week, with a number of youth entering their senior year of high school, and others off to college or university. I'm exercising one of the prerogatives of being old, namely giving unsolicited advice to young people.

The advice is straightforward - become part of something significant. Play a part, however small, in actually improving the world we live in. Dare to try to change society.

I was fortunate. I came of age at a time ? the 1960s - when the pace of social change speeded up tremendously. And youth were often at the front of that wave of change. ?The Youth Counter-Culture?, as it was called, not only brought new art, music, and dress, but more importantly, called into question many of what had been the hallmarks of conventional wisdom and the pillars of the social structure. The result was new thinking about racial equality, gender roles, sexuality, the environment, and overall social justice. In Canada, we saw the birth of bilingualism, multi-culturalism, women's liberation, and native rights. And young men and women had the opportunity to play a part in the development of new attitudes and practices.

The great English poet William Wordsworth captured the excitement of that feeling of being part of a period where history itself was changing ? in his case, at the dawn of the French Revolution

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven.

But revolutions can run out of steam. Many of the issues raised in the '60s are yet to be resolved. We have not yet achieved the ?Just Society? that Pierre Trudeau (aka Justin's father) hoped for. On many fronts, there is much work to be done. The question is whether new people will put their ?hands to the plough?, as the old civil rights anthem calls for, and move it on.

Today's young people have many concerns unique to their generation. A college education, though it leaves a legacy of debt, does not guarantee a career. Students are urged to keep focused on what will advance their future job prospects, and ignore ?distractions.? Of course, this is practical, common-sense advice. It reminds me of the lyric to Supertramp's ?Logical Song?

They sent me away to teach me how to be sensible,
Logical, responsible, practical.
Won't you sign up your name, we'd like to feel you're
Acceptable, respectable, presentable

However, I'd like to suggest that when you get old and look back, you appreciate the times when you took a stand that not everyone approved of, when you worked for a goal greater than your own interests, when you helped others and not just yourself. You take pride not in the money you made, or the possessions you owned, but in the causes you worked for.

Many contend that there are no great causes left. Not true. Human-caused climate change is a bigger threat to us now than it was 50 years ago. More environmental areas are under threat than ever. Many Aboriginal communities remain deprived of essential socio-economic benefits. Poverty persists. Anti-immigrant bias remains all too prevalent.

Young people can get involved in these issues. Despite having to go into hiding as a young girl, Anne Frank wrote: ?Nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.?

The transition to college or university offers many chances to get active in change-seeking groups. But you don't have to go away to find socially meaningful work to help with. Bancroft has many organizations working to improve local conditions ? like North

Hastings Community Trust, or Social Justice Without Borders, to name just two.

High school students are required to complete 40 hours of ?community service? before graduation. Sometimes this becomes a pro-forma exercise. But what if it became a life-long habit?

Young people should ask themselves this: when you settle into your adult home, what will you want to have displayed on your walls? Just fishing and hunting trophies? Or photos showing you with your shoulder to the wheel of a cause that leads to a better society?

As Dr. Seuss wrote in *The Lorax*:

?Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot,
Nothing is going to get better. It's not.?

In other words, when you're with your future kids or grandkids and there's a flashback on a news show to a time of significant change, what will you be able to say? ?I watched that on television?, or ?I was a part of that; I was there!?