

SNG-Why so angry-6-12-17

Why are so many of us so angry?

By Jim Nowlan

In 1978 my friend Ron Michaelson of Springfield had just finished officiating a double-overtime super-sectional high school basketball game. On his way off the gym floor to the locker room, Ron was attacked by family members of a losing player. They broke his nose and put him in the hospital for several days.

So Ron is a sensitive observer of anger in American, and he says it's getting worse all the time. Even in youth sports for little tykes, Ron says, he sees coaches venting anger at the refs all the time, and parents doing the same toward coaches who don't play their kids enough.

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According to the National Opinion Research Center, inflation-adjusted per-person income is up three times from what it was in 1950, yet the percentage of us "very happy" has not increased at all since then. Though the wealth gains are not evenly spread, even the poor are much better off than was the case in 1950.

At this point, and appreciate that I am generalizing and not speaking about everyone, I think the roots of our frustrations and anger are found in the following:

- Many see their positions declining relative to others. The lives of the rich and famous are paraded before us ad nauseam. Parents and young adult children fear the latter won't do so well as the former did.

- The middle class has clearly shrunk as a percentage of the whole. The Pew Research Center reports that in 1971 61 percent of us were in the middle class; last year only 49 percent were.
- Many folks in rural America, who either don't want to or lack the skills to move to the city, are angry about being stuck in a setting where good jobs have dried up. "Deaths of despair" have soared among inadequately educated white males of working age, according to two Princeton economists writing in the March 23 Wall Street Journal.
- The 16 percent of Americans with incomes over \$100,000, who pay 80 percent of income taxes, are frustrated with having to pay health care costs for many of the 71 percent who contribute less than 6 percent of income tax revenue.
- The incredible, unprecedented rate of change is scaring many. We don't know how to keep up in a world being transformed at warp speed from largely human endeavor to largely digital control.
- Social media allow us to vent our anger impersonally to audiences of like-minded people. David Myers, author of a psychology textbook in its 10<sup>th</sup> edition, tells us that venting anger doesn't reduce anger but actually increases it.
- In our often-long retirements, we have more time to ruminate and let perceived wrongs and ills fester. When I was a child, people didn't retire; they worked until they were no longer able and were probably too tired at end of day to ruminate.
- "Us versus them" polarization increases: white v. blacks; rich v. poor; rural v. urban; Christian v. non-Christian.

Our human nature makes it hard for us to blame ourselves for our plight, so we displace our anger toward others.

In her 2016 book on “The Politics of Resentment,” which basically foretold the Trump victory, Katherine Cramer sat in on scores of coffee klatches in her rural Wisconsin. She found much anger around the diner and café tables directed toward city folks in power in “M&M” (Milwaukee and Madison) for not helping “it” come back (meaning good jobs and good times) to small-town Wisconsin.

[Here in Illinois, our dysfunctional state government and the public employee pension albatross (which makes state government spending, and thus taxes, much higher than otherwise) provide additional grist for frustration, even anger.]

American society has mended fissures before, if not perfectly or wholly: The Civil War; labor management strife in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and of course the Viet Nam Conflict and Civil Rights Movement of the 1960-70s.

If there is anything to my snapshot observations above, what can we do to calm things down, bring us back to singing from the same hymnbook (well, that may be too much to ask)?

We need leaders at all levels who will draw us together rather than divide us and play to our frustrations. I think Ronald Reagan did this to an extent with his positive “Morning in America” theme.

We also need candidates willing to run constructive campaigns, even at the real risk of losing. Today’s young political consultants have been brought up on diets of vicious attack messages. Their worldview lacks an understanding of a time when parties clashed over policies yet ultimately came together to address problems. Think Everett Dirksen and Lyndon Johnson. It can be Morning in America again, but it won’t be easy.