

HOW COULD ANYTHING THAT FEELS SO BAD BE SO GOOD?

by RICHARD E. FARSON

Maybe it is time to adopt a new strategy in trying to figure out why life today is so difficult, and what can be done about it. Assume that not only are things often not what they seem, they may be just the opposite of what they seem. When it comes to human affairs, everything is paradoxical.

People are discontented these days, for example, not because things are worse than ever, but because things are better than ever. Take marriage. In California there are about six divorces for every ten marriages—even higher in some of the better communities. One must admit that a good deal of discontent is reflected in those statistics. But the explanation so frequently offered—that the institution of marriage is in a state of collapse—simply does not hold. Marriage has never been more popular and desirable than it is now; so appealing in fact, that even those who are in the process of divorce can scarcely wait for the law to allow them to marry again.

The problem is that people have never before entered marriage with the high expectations they now hold. Throughout history, the family has been a vital unit for survival, starting as a defense system for physical survival, and gradually becoming a unit for economic survival. Now, of course, the family has become a physical and economic liability rather than an asset. Having met, as a society, the basic survival and security needs, people simply don't need each other anymore to fight Indians or spin yarn—or wash dishes or repair electrical plugs for that matter. The bonds of marriage and family life are no longer functional, but affectional. People used to come to love each other because they needed each other. Now it's just the other way around. They need each other because they love each other.

Listening to the complaints of those recently divorced, one seldom hears of

brutality and desertion, but usually something like, "We just don't communicate very well," "The educational differences between us were simply too great to overcome," "I felt trapped in the relationship," "He won't let me be me," "We don't have much in common anymore." These complaints are interesting, because they reflect high-order discontent resulting from the failure of marriage to meet the great expectations held for it. Couples now expect—and demand—communication and understanding, shared values and goals, intellectual companionship, full sexual lives, deep romantic love, great moments of intimacy. By and large, marriage today actually does deliver such moments, but as a result couples have gone on to burden the relationship with even greater demands. To some extent it has been the success of marriage that has created the discontent.

The same appears to be true in the civil rights movement. The gains that have been made have led not to satisfaction but to increased tension and dissatisfaction, particularly among those benefiting from such gains. The discontent is higher in the North than the South, higher in cities than in rural areas.

One could go on—the protests of student activists are greater at the better universities. Demands for freedom and democracy and education and individual liberty and free speech are greatest in the nation which leads the world in these respects. The history of revolutions shows that they come *after* reforms have been made, when people are strong enough to have developed a vision of better things.

The disturbing paradox of social change is that improvement brings the need for more improvement in constantly accelerating demands. So, compared to what *used* to be, society is way ahead; compared to what *might* be, it is way behind. Society is enabled to feel that conditions are rotten, because they are actually so good.

Another problem is that everything is temporary, nothing lasts. We have grown up with the idea that in order to develop personal security we need stability, roots, consistency, and familiar-

ity. Yet we live in a world which in every respect is continually changing. Whether we are talking about skyscrapers or family life, scientific facts or religious values, all are highly temporary and becoming even more so. If one were to plot a curve showing the incidence of invention throughout the history of man, one would see that change is not just increasing but actually accelerating. Changes are coming faster and faster—in a sense change has become a way of life. The only people who will live successfully in tomorrow's world are those who can accept and enjoy temporary systems.

Moments, then, are the most we can expect from the things we create and produce. We are beginning to change their basis of evaluation from the permanent usefulness of things to their ability to create moments of positive experience. Yet with nothing to rely upon except change itself, we find ourselves increasingly disturbed and disrupted as a society.

People are also troubled because of the new participative mood that exists today. It's a do-it-yourself society; every layman wants to get into the act. Emerson's "do your own thing" has become the cliché of the times. People no longer accept being passive members. They now want to be active changers.

This participative phenomenon can be seen in every part of contemporary life—on campus, in the church, in the mass media, in the arts, in business and industry, on ghetto streets, in the family. It is succeeding to the point where people are having to abandon their old concepts of elitism. The myths that wisdom, creativity, and competence are rare, difficult to evoke, and highly desired, are giving way to a view that they are rather common, relatively easy to elicit, and desired only in situations where they are not too disruptive or difficult to manage.

The problem is that modern man seems unable to redesign his institutions fast enough to accommodate the new demands, the new intelligence, the new abilities of segments of society which, heretofore, have not been taken seriously. Consequently, people are frightened by the black revolution, paralyzed by student activism, and now face what may be even more devastating—the women's rebellion.

As if all this weren't enough, society may also be experiencing a reverse transmission of culture. To put it simply, today's young people probably know more than their elders. Wisdom and culture have always been transmitted from the older generation to the younger. Now, perhaps for the first time in history, there is a reversal of that process. Young people used to

want to be like their elders; today it's the other way around.

The old, of course, always learned some things from the young. Fashion and dance, for example. But now they are learning from youth about the nature of society, about world affairs, about human relations, about life. The young have much to teach in matters of taste and judgment, in ethics and morals. They are attending school in greater numbers, staying longer, and learning more than former generations did. All kinds of people—advertising executives, futurists, artists, designers, social scientists—now look to youth as the leading edge of contemporary culture. If McLuhan is right, the young are sensing the world in ways never sensed before, and, consequently, they have developed an approach to life which is very different from that of their elders. Margaret Mead describes the plight of the over-thirty generation as being similar to that of the alien trying to learn about a foreign culture. It is small wonder then that the institutions in which leadership is entrusted only to the elders (and what institution isn't?) are so unstable.

Society simply has not had these kinds of problems before, and to meet them it will have to adopt strategies for their solution that are as new, and as different, and as paradoxical as are the problems themselves.

Instead of trying to reduce the discontent felt, try to raise the level or quality of the discontent. Perhaps the most that can be hoped for is to have high-order discontent in today's society, discontent about things that really matter. Rather than evaluating programs in terms of how happy they make people, how satisfied those people become, programs must be evaluated in terms of the quality of the discontent they engender. For example, if a consultant wants to assess whether or not an organization is healthy, he doesn't ask, "Is there an absence of complaints?" but rather, "What kinds of complaints are there?" Psychologist Abraham Maslow suggests that we analyze the *quality* of the complaint being registered. In his terms, a low-level grumble would involve, for instance, a complaint about working conditions; a high-level grumble might have to do with matters beyond one's own selfish interests—a concern for fairness in the treatment of another person, for example—while a meta-grumble would have to do with self-actualization needs, such as feeling that one's talents are not being fully utilized, wanting to be in on things, wanting to make a greater contribution.

As an illustration, instead of trying to negotiate only on the low-order complaints of black students having to do

with the number of black teachers on a faculty or the lack of soul food in the school cafeteria, efforts should transcend these problems, meet those demands, and go well beyond them by raising the level of discontent so that black students are complaining about the quality of education and demanding a chance to reinvent the whole system. When such complaints are heard, the situation will be much improved, for then *all* men will be able to engage in a joint effort toward a common goal.

Instead of trying to “cool it” in a crisis, use the time of crisis to make major changes and improvements. Many individuals feel that in a crisis the only thing to do is to try to “hang in there,” call everything to a halt, try to maintain previous conditions, let it pass, and hope things will return to normal. Instead, they should capitalize on the momentum that is in the developing mood of people during a crisis to energize the changes that must be made. It is analogous to the jujitsu technique of moving with one’s opponent and using his momentum to gain the advantage; of course, in correcting social ills *everyone* gains, nobody loses.

Instead of trying to make gradual changes in small increments, make big changes. After all, big changes are relatively easier to make than are small ones. Some people assume that the way

to bring about improvement is to make the change small enough so that nobody will notice it. This approach has never worked, and one can't help but wonder why such thinking continues. Everyone knows how to resist small changes; they do it all the time. If, however, the change is big enough, resistance can't be mobilized against it. Management can make a sweeping organizational change, but just let a manager try to change someone's desk from here to there, and see the great difficulty he encounters. All change is resisted, so the question is how can the changes be made big enough so that they have a chance of succeeding?

Instead of trying to improve people, improve environments. All too often the conclusion is reached that all problems boil down to such people problems as basic attitude differences and personality clashes. And it is believed that work must first be done to change people. But that may not be the best strategy. People, fundamentally, change little in their personalities and attitudes. They can, however, change markedly in their responses to different environments, situations, and conditions.

It is known how to create conditions which will evoke from just about anybody the full range of human behavior,

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"You mean you don't recall talking to me last night? . . . And I always thought elephants had such good memories."

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Who Needs History?

Some activist professors have told us in recent weeks that Henry Ford was right when he said that history was bunk, and that even a study of history will be of no use to coming generations. Everywhere we look, the extremist minority is convinced that the present moment, however exciting or ridiculous, is the thing that matters and that deliberate rejection of the past is the only way to look upon a future where all men are brothers in a peaceful world.

Loren Eiseley, professor of anthropology and the history of science at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote in a recent editorial in *Science*: "A yearning for a life of noble savagery without the accumulated burdens of history seems in danger of engulfing a whole generation, as it did the French philosophers and their eighteenth-century followers. Those individuals who persist in pursuing the mind-destroying drug of constant action have not only confined themselves to an increasingly chaotic present—they are also, by the deliberate abandonment of their past, destroying the conceptual tools and values that are the means of introducing the rational into the oncoming future." Moreover, we are a society apparently bemused in purpose, yet secretly homesick for a world of lost tranquillity.

Well, perhaps the activist professors are right, perhaps we have been wasting our time on irrelevant matters like history; the complicated mosaic of the past may mean nothing at all. Yet experience suggests, as Will Durant once

put it, that an old tradition must not be too quickly rejected since our ancestors were not all fools. Another way of saying the same thing is that there is nothing new under the sun except arrangement. Mercy, justice, and integrity have always been there and are there still, even now in an increasingly unpredictable and violent world. But these facts and principles are seen from time to time in new arrangements, new lights, new words, new equations.

Of what specific value is history, which in the end is simply journalism in another form? It might be well for the Now generation (and its parents) to take a look at the history of Rome whose decline and fall were brought about by factors and events painfully paralleling some of the things we are now going through in materialistic America. Rome, for example, found it necessary to raise taxes higher and higher as time went by to pay for foreign wars, preparations for war, or the social consequences of war. Soldiers discovered, however, that the pay they received when they returned from a campaign bought less than a smaller income had bought before they left home—the inflationary nature of military spending continually raised the price of everything.

Little by little, law and morals broke down and inflation soared. By the reign of Diocletian in the fourth century A.D. gold could buy only a fraction of what it had in the Golden Age that began with the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. Lesser coinage even-

tually was inflated out of sight, then revalued. Violence grew to become so much a part of the daily routine of the average Roman that almost all of his diversions were obscenely cruel, particularly mass entertainment. In the end, constant inflation and weakening of moral fiber opened Rome to the sack of the Visigoths, and only the pleas of Pope Leo I saved the city and its populace from annihilation.

In the eighteenth century—a student of history may learn—Thomas Paine became world renowned as a political theorist: his *Common Sense* hastened the Declaration of Independence; his pamphlets sustained colonial revolutionaries until victory came; and his defense of the French Revolution (*The Rights of Man*) made him an unprecedented hero in France. Yet, after a triumphant Paris greeting in 1792, Paine was imprisoned by newer revolutionaries less than a year later in an "increasingly chaotic present." In the Reign of Terror that followed, Robespierre and his followers triumphed over the moderates, assassinated most of the opposition leaders—as they had in turn assassinated royal prisoners—and Robespierre himself was executed when his final excesses frightened even his own associates.

Who needs history? President Garfield called history the unrolled scroll of prophecy, and it is said that those who do not heed it are condemned to relive it. Who among us who lived through a year of bombing in London would be willing to bear another, with or without atomic warheads? Not many, surely. Yet each hour of each day we in this country and the Soviets in theirs—as well as others with lesser reserves—manufacture and stock-pile hydrogen bombs of such unbelievably destructive force that on both sides of the curtain there are already enough of these monsters to destroy within one week every city of any size in Europe and North America.

The revolution of the Now generation is not wholly idiotic and its adherents not all crazy kids with long hair and loose morals. Student violence usually grows from a kernel of truth and a moral judgment on the part of a good percentage of those who participate that the world they are about to inherit is wrong and needs righting. Men are not equal, men are hungry, men kill one another and have in their vaults the power to destroy all and everyone. But in his haste to overcome injustice, to outlaw war, to bring equality among men, to feed the hungry, and to aid the afflicted, the activist would be wise not to disregard knowledge of the past, since if he does he is, as Robespierre, likely to endure it.

—RICHARD L. TOBIN.