

What Has Changed?

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What has changed? That was the question that my partner, Rod Petersen, asked me last week after the Florida school shooting tragedy. We both come from farm families who graduated from Clay Central High School here in Royal, Iowa in 1970. He noted that half of the boys in our class had a shotgun in the back window of the truck in case they saw a pheasant on the way home from school. There were shotguns and rifles in the parking lot at school but there were no school shootings.

His question got me and my wife, who also graduated with us in 1970, to thinking over the weekend. We had a class size around 55 and we could not think of any family where there was a divorce. They were all two-parent families. The only single mom was due to the death of the father. They were actually mostly 4-6 parent families back then, as most of the grandparents were not far away and they were not divorced either so the kids had extended family support.

The wild child in our class had been adopted, which would correlate with early childhood trauma. There was booze but no other substance abuse that I was aware of. Classmates had to go away to college for that. I think most of us all went to church on Sunday. There were four churches in a town of 500. Our great grandfathers and grandfathers built them.

The most striking thing that we could identify that was different though, was that nearly all of the moms worked at home back then. It was a farming community and many were farm wives but even most women who lived in town did not work outside the home. They were moms and homemakers, we ate our meals together as a family which is rarer today and there was no distraction from smart phones and social media at family gatherings. I read books. Kids don't do that much today. . . instead their faces are glued to Snapchat and Instagram. But then, so is mom and dad's face many times. What has changed is the evolution of the family and how it impacts kids differently today than it did during my baby-boomer generation.

I am not going to say that wives working outside the home changed everything because women can work outside the home and there can still be strong family structure. It helps greatly if there is a dad. But these are foundational blocks, that if uncompensated for, went missing from the family structure. That, along with many other things, is responsible for the cultural shift that we are seeing. Domestic violence, abuse, single parents, drug use, social media, trauma kids, weak family structures are all part of what has been a cultural change that has slowly evolved, most would say eroding, until we got to where we are today, asking the question of what has changed?

There is a game called JENGA, which is a whole bunch of blocks stacked together on top of one another. The object of the game is to take turns removing blocks one by one until the stack topples over which determines the loser. What our society has done since my generation, which as a general statement, started from a strong foundation . . . is we have pulled out blocks, one after the other. This was the case of our society as a whole as well as for individuals that collectively make up society. "The CDC says that 20% of kids today age 3-17 have, in any given year, a mental or emotional illness (WSJ)." "21% of prison inmates have a serious mental illness (NPR)." "In the

society that we have created over the past 40 years you know we are not making fewer emotionally ill young people, but more (Peggy Noonan)."

The Florida shooter had blocks pulled out from under him from the day he was born. There are millions of at-risk kids in schools today that have had foundational blocks that are missing and that increases their vulnerability of collapsing. Legislatures do not want to spend the money on Medicare, schools or mental health needed to put missing JENGA blocks back in these kids, nor have they responded in any meaningful way to the behavioral consequences that occur when they don't. . . such as school shootings. Most kids, thank goodness, will be fine despite a missing block or two. Or they will receive the guidance from family, adoptive parents, counselors, mental health, school support and even law enforcement that will keep their tower of blocks standing. Some however, slip through the cracks. The Florida shooter was a poster child for what can happen when that happens. That is not an excuse for his action but an explanation.

So now they want to take away the guns because our culture has devolved to the point where a troubled society can no longer responsibly manage the right to bear arms without endangering itself. To stubbornly resist any change to the system of gun laws as the NRA does is delusional. The culture and society has changed and therefore the rules for gun regulation have to change too in order to safeguard public safety. I believe that this can be done and still respect the 2nd amendment. This issue of gun violence is a behavior. . . .often an outcry of anguish manifesting itself that has resulted from deterioration of much larger structural and cultural foundational issues that has occurred.

One could argue that gun violence is a symptom of what are much deeper comprehensive problems that have enormous consequences to the health of the country. It is too ugly to be called a distraction, but we will not fix the root cause of our cultural and societal deterioration with a ban on guns. Don't mistake government as the problem. Government can do some things to help as I have noted, but it is not the solution to decades of social fraying. The guns have not changed that much. We did.