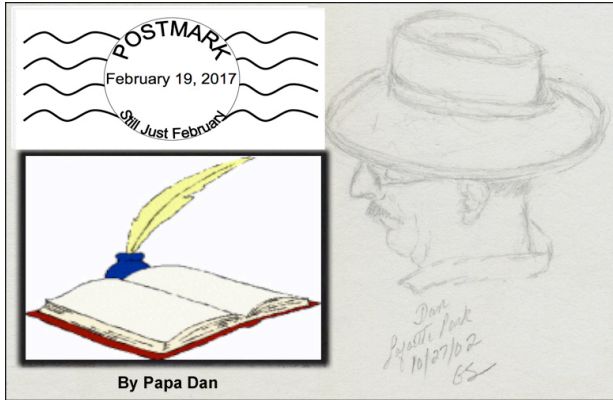


And It's Still Just February

By Dan Sapone



"Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes. How do you measure a year in a life?"
— from "Rent"

Some Years Stand Out

I recently wrote a piece asking "[What kind of year was 2016?](#)" Some of you participated by contributing to *ConVivio's* "Thirty-Word Challenge" and sent me your assessments of how 2016 will lead to 2017. You sent me some great words. (Take a look: <http://convivio-online.net/looking-back-at-2016-ahead-to-2017>.) Maybe though, the bigger question is ... what difference does a single year make? Is 2017 going to be just a detour or will it be a major turning point?

Over the course of my 66+ trips around the sun, some years stand out in memory — some were good, some bad, and some were turning points in the flow of history. During the first half of the 2017 Super Bowl (while the Falcons were still blowing out the Patriots), I was sitting with an enlightened friend of mine (I'll call him Judge Danny) and somehow we got to talking about years. At halftime, the TV commentators were talking about other Super Bowl blowouts, like the 49er destruction of the Broncos (55-10) in 1990.

PapaDan: 1989 was a memorable year, too. The 49ers beat the Bengals...

Judge Danny: Then there was the 1989 World Series with the Giants and A's...

PapaDan: I don't want to talk about it. [*Changing the subject*] That was also the year the Berlin Wall came down, and revolutions popped up all over Eastern Europe.

Judge Danny: Right...the end of the Cold War.

From sports we segued to "most momentous years."

PapaDan: 1969 — Armstrong walked on the moon...

Judge Danny: And returned home. 1963 was unforgettable. It hurt bad. I was thirteen.

PapaDan: Yes, it hurt. 1964 was better, the Beatles and lots of great music. And 1951 was a huge year in baseball. Growing up, I read all about Bobby Thompson's "shot heard 'round the world." Russ Hodges went crazy: "THE GIANTS WIN THE PENNANT! THE GIANTS WIN THE PENNANT!" 1962 was another good year for the Giants, less dramatic but a big thrill.

Judge Danny: I remember; but those were *just* baseball, right?

PapaDan: Right. So, in our lifetime, what do you figure was the most important year of all?

Judge Danny: We're the same age, right? We both graduated in 1968. That was the biggest year since we've been around. Don't you think?

PapaDan: Wow. Yes. No question about it. 1968 was a turning point.

We were interrupted by the second half kickoff and the subject of the “most important year” didn’t come up again — we were too busy bemoaning the collapse of the Atlanta Falcons. The next morning, though, after depressing myself with the newspaper, I decided that Judge Danny had been right — 1968 was the single biggest turning point during my lifetime, both for me and for America. There was a lot going on during several years of the turbulent sixties. But 1968 stands out. The title of an important research project on the subject said it well: “The 1968 Project — A Nation Coming of Age.”

What did we see on the Evening News in 1968?

It was a year of “just one damn thing after another.” President Lyndon Johnson began the year with his State of the Union Address noting that “Our country is challenged at home and abroad,” and the challenges began immediately. One week later, North Korean patrol boats captured the Navy intelligence ship “Pueblo” within their 12-mile territorial waters, initiating a dangerous year-long international crisis. Then, a week later, the Vietcong launched the brutal “Tet” offensive; massive numbers of troops poured out of the jungles and devastated dozens of cities and towns. The surprise invasion of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon and sudden large-scale deaths of American soldiers quickly turned public opinion against the war. Two days later, Richard Nixon declared his candidacy for president. The following week, the Pentagon announced the largest one-week casualty figures of the war and Walter Cronkite, having just returned from a tour of the battlefields, reported that the best America could expect in the war was “a stalemate.” In the White House, President Johnson said privately, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America.”

→ *All that, and it was still just February.*

As the year unfolded, the news continued to surprise and distress a lot of people.

— March 12: Senator Gene McCarthy nearly defeated the sitting president of his own party in the New Hampshire primary. Four days later, Senator Robert Kennedy withdrew his support of President Johnson and announced his candidacy.

— On March 31: President Johnson, overwhelmed by anti-war pressure, announced, “I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.”

— April 4: one week after leading a march in Memphis that turned violent, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot and killed while planning his “Poor People’s March on Washington,” sparking riots across the country. Robert Kennedy, hearing of the murder just before giving a speech in Indianapolis, stood up at a street corner and gave an emotional extemporaneous [eulogy](#) — pleading with the mostly black audience “to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of the world.”

— On April 29, the musical “Hair” opened on Broadway, dramatizing powerful social and political change and a “generation gap” between those who were coming of age in 1968 and their parents’ generation.

— May 6: In Paris, 5,000 students marched in what was soon called “Bloody Monday,” the most violent day of a student revolt. Sympathetic strikes involved nine million French workers.

— June 4: Robert Kennedy won the California Presidential Primary, a victory that all but assured him the party’s nomination. Minutes after his victory speech, he was assassinated.



- July 24: at the Newport Folk Festival, singer Arlo Guthrie performs his 20-minute ballad “Alice’s Restaurant” to rave reviews. (“You can get anything you want, at Alice’s Restaurant.”)
- August 8: The Republicans nominated Richard Nixon to be their presidential candidate.
- August 20: The Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia with 200,000 troops.
- August 26: The Democrats nominated Hubert Humphrey for president. Outside the convention, protests erupted and Chicago police arrested nearly 200 people and sent more than 100 others to hospitals with “night-stick” head injuries.
- September 7: “Women’s liberation” groups protested at the Miss America contest in Atlantic City. While nothing actually burned, the phrase “symbolic bra-burning” was coined.
- October 12: The Summer Olympics opened in Mexico City, boycotted by 32 nations to protest South Africa’s participation. Two U.S. medal winners in the 200-meter dash, gave the “Black Power” salute during playing of the Star-Spangled Banner at the medal ceremony.
- November 5: On Election Day, 31,770,000 (43%) voted for Nixon. 31,270,000 (42.7%) voted for Humphrey. 9,906,000 (13.5%) voted for George Wallace.
- November 14: On “Turn In Your Draft Card Day,” young men across the country burned their draft cards and protested the Vietnam War.
- December 12: Robert and Ethel Kennedy’s eleventh child, Rory, is born.

What was it like for those of us watching all of this?

For me and others born in dead-center in the 20th century, 1968 was a singular turning point. We were “The Class of ‘68” at Antioch High School. Except for the stories Walter Cronkite told us on The Evening News, the future looked bright. Like most of my high-school friends, I lived in a bubble of stability and certainty. High school was good for me — I got good grades, I played varsity sports, and in May I was accepted to the college of my choice (Santa Clara University). I had a supportive family who encouraged me every step of the way, and I was surrounded by friends who were a lot like me. But 1968 was also the year I got my first look at discrimination, major disappointment, and local cruelty.

Racial Discrimination

I started kindergarten in Antioch in 1955 and it took me until I started high school to notice that there had never been ANY black students in my school or anywhere in my town. The first black kids I met were on the basketball court when Antioch High played Pittsburg High.

That year, Antioch’s foreign exchange student was a girl from South Africa. Apartheid was still in full force there and I remember hearing her speak proudly about “separate but equal.” It didn’t sound right to me.

Then came “the big story.” The parents of a student two years behind me (class of ‘70) had moved to Antioch at the beginning of the school year. As new arrivals, they were visited by city’s the “Welcome Wagon” and given a basket with various household products, advertisements for local stores, and advice about the town. The “Welcome Wagon” greeter assured this new family that “This is a nice town full of nice people. And don’t worry, you won’t find any blacks here — the realtors and landlords in town make sure of that.” The new neighbors didn’t like that at all. They asked around and found that others had heard the same thing. Long story short, they filed a class-action lawsuit that gave Antioch an apparently well-deserved reputation for racism. I was stunned — discrimination in MY town!



Optimism, Disappointment, Cruelty, and Regret

Around midnight on Tuesday, June 4, 1968, I went to bed happy. I had turned off the TV following Robert Kennedy's victory speech after winning the California Primary. "Let's go on to Chicago and win there," he concluded. It was one of the last three "school nights" before my graduation on Friday. I was a huge fan of the Senator — my father passed on to me that we were "Roosevelt/Kennedy Democrats." I wanted very much for RFK to become president and pick up where his brother had left off. I figured Bobbie would end the war (and, therefore, the draft), support the civil rights legacy of Dr. King, and ... well ... save us from Richard Nixon. In the morning, I was still in bed when I heard my mother come back from retrieving the newspaper and heard her shout, "Turn on the television!" I jumped out of bed and turned on the TV to hear that Robert Kennedy had been shot right after delivering that victory speech. I stared at the TV and cried. I was 18 years old and I cried, hard.

Numb, I went to school. Some kids were stunned, a few were visibly upset, others hadn't yet heard the news. It was the talk of the hallways by noon. After lunch, I walked into my Journalism class and found one student crying uncontrollably at her desk. She was known to be an extremely sensitive girl and prone to emotional displays. A few kids made it their business to try to protect her from bullies who made fun of her. Before the teacher arrived and before I realized what was happening, a jerk named Michael, one of those bullies who sensed weakness and attacked for the fun of it, went up to her and announced, "Those Kennedys got what they deserved. I say it's about time. There's just one left, and we'll see about him." She knocked over her desk as she ran sobbing from the room. Michael strutted as he followed her out the door. I quietly righted her desk and walked away as other students began to arrive.

This incident compounded the darkness I was feeling — darkness that got a lot worse before it got better. It took me some time, perhaps mid-summer, before the regret set in. I had never actually punched anyone in my 18 years (or since); and if I had punched Michael, nothing would have gotten better. But I have to say that the single greatest regret that endures all of these decades since my high-school days is that I didn't do or say ANYTHING. I was the witness to something harmful done to a vulnerable person ... and I didn't do anything.

Moving into a New World

Graduation was fun. It made me feel that the future was bright. But as summer warmed up, I became aware that the "bubble of stability and certainty" that I had lived in was disappearing. I was moving out of a comfortable home and leaving behind a school and a town where I had known sort-of everybody. I realized that I would be surrounded by strangers. So, come the first of September, I had moved into the dorm (with the help of my sister), and life began anew. Shortly after that, my roommate looked at me one day and declared, "A guy's got to have some hair" and before I knew it, I had grown a mustache that I would have for the next forty years.

College was great! There was terrific music everywhere (that most of our parents hated). Judy Collins performed a concert in my cafeteria my first month at school. Later that year, I spent a weekend with my oldest home-town friend in his dorm at the University of San Francisco; and we saw a free concert with The Jefferson Airplane in the Golden Gate Park Panhandle, (We even got "busted" by the dorm prefect ... for drinking beer. Yep, beer.)



Down the hall in my dorm, was Dan Pastorini, our quarterback (a future NFL star) and the cheerleaders were all guys. (Huh?!) Professor Misselbrook inspired me with Robert Frost and Shakespeare, Dr. Bellotti taught my first (and last) Economics class (I applied as an Econ major), and Dr. Nyquist, the Music Department chairman, stimulated a lifelong interest in Baroque music (who wouldda thunk?). But still, who was I? Where was I going? Would I end up taking over my Dad's business (the plan) or become a teacher, writer, or something else? How soon would I begin to feel at home ... again? As the year ended, the newspaper continued its drumbeat of scary stories — 549,000 troops in Vietnam and a death toll of 17,000, the highest in the war's history. The day I drove home for Christmas, the "Pueblo," was finally released. I admit I didn't notice either story. Suddenly, all of the worldwide uncertainty that I had heard on The Evening News all year, didn't seem as important as the turning point I was experiencing as an 18-year-old college freshman on my own.

Back to "the future": 2017

So, fast-forward nearly 50 years. Here we are in 2017, trying to make sense of a year that seems to change every day. In just a month, the leader of the free world:

- Spread a series of "alternative facts" that advisors repeated and the world knew to be false,
- Initiated a potential constitutional crisis and caused chaos world-wide at airports, cities, and universities with an executive order to ban immigrants from seven countries, an order that he said had been implemented "smoothly" until it was blocked by a "so-called judge,"
- Sent a young "senior advisor" out to threaten judicial authority on the Sunday talk shows and clarify that "the powers of the president to protect our country ... will not be questioned,"
- Told the Mexican president that he might send troops into his country to "take care of" some of his "bad hombres"; that same day he hung up on the leader of Australia,
- Insulted a long-term congressman and civil-rights icon on the Martin Luther King holiday, calling him "all talk, talk, talk" and calling his hometown of Atlanta a "crime-ridden hellhole,"
- Promoted a political strategist (former Breitbart executive) to the National Security Council, and demoted the Director of National Intelligence and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,
- Installed a national security advisor who had an inappropriate/illegal, back-channel relationship with America's most dangerous adversary, then fired him for it, and blamed his firing on the news media for spreading fake news ("the information was real but the news was fake" and "I didn't direct him to do it but I would have if I thought he wasn't doing it."),
- Responded to accusations of mental instability by saying "I comprehend very well, OK, better, I think, than almost anybody," and observed that, in his chaotic first month in office, his administration was a "smooth-running machine."

Commentators, writers, readers, listeners, citizens, others (you know, you and me) are asking questions like these: What's true and what's not? How do we know? Who is "we" and who is "they?" Do the things we've learned over a lifetime still apply to the present moment? To the future? And most important, what can we do to make sure this year is only a detour and not a turning point?

→ *And it's still just February.*

