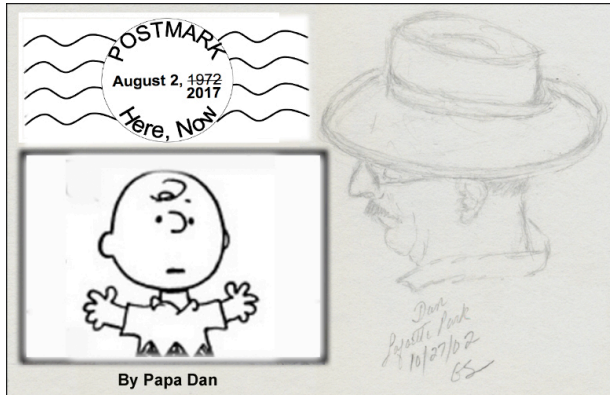


Unexpected Wisdom

By Dan Sapone



“It is important to make plans for the future, as long as you are prepared to change them when the future comes.”

— Albert J. Sapone, 1970



First appeared August 6, 1972 — Charles Schultz

When I cut this cartoon out of the San Francisco Chronicle on August 6, 1972, the world I knew was changing dramatically. Two months before, I had graduated from Santa Clara University with my double major in English Literature and Philosophy. Less than a week before it appeared, Woodard and Bernstein published their first in a series of *New York Times* reports about a “third-rate burglary” that would lead to Richard Nixon’s resignation two years later. The week the cartoon appeared, I was hired into my first professional job. And that summer, for the second year in a row, no record albums were released by a band called “The Beatles.” All were milestones of change that *felt* dramatic and disorienting, or at least a bit uncomfortable; but looking back, they were really just inevitable extensions of what had gone before — just like the scene in the *Peanuts* cartoon.

So, aren’t these the kinds of things every generation experiences — when the conditions of stability we had learned to expect, no longer seem to apply? Kinda universal experiences, aren’t they? Yet, I suspect that each one of us felt — and feels — that our own experience with discomfoting change is more or less unique to us. Does Charlie Brown’s warning matter? What does it mean? Here’s where I ask my “So what?” question.

I do remember the security of sitting in the back seat — my parents took me to the Drive-In movies from time to time. I'm pretty sure I saw the "Ten Commandments" with Charlton Heston at the Bridgehead Drive-In, in the back seat of my parent's 1956 Oldsmobile.; I remember eating popcorn, drinking Coca Cola, and having the option of lying down if I got tired or bored (which I'm pretty sure did — I was six years old). I don't remember noticing, or regretting when that practice went away. In the cartoon, Charlie Brown shows some remarkable prescience to be able to report to Peppermint Patty that those days of "security" would end. Nobody warned me, so I guess I didn't notice. Did anybody warn you? What do you remember?

I suppose starting a new school — especially high school — was a big transition, but my memories of those transitions are positive. I was good at school and it wasn't intimidating. Going away to college was a bigger challenge. But, it wasn't the "college" part; it was the "going away" part that was disorienting.

While graduating was a triumph, it did carry some anxiety. Not the graduating part — my Dad had told me early and often that I was going to be the first in my family to graduate from college whether I wanted to or not. That part was expected; and I had no reason to doubt it. But one aspect of it was a deviation from long-held expectations. My Dad had hoped that I would graduate with a degree in business (I arrived as an Economics major) so I could take my place in the insurance business and he could hang an "And Son" sign under the "A.J. Sapone Insurance" sign out in front of his office. BUT ... during my sophomore year, I came to realize that studying business didn't generate the kind of excitement in me that Literature and Philosophy did. I wanted to change my major, but before I could do that — and study words and ideas instead of dollars and cents — I figured there was a hurdle I had to overcome ...

I went home for the summer and told my Dad all about literature, music, and philosophy and why I thought it all mattered so much. Then, I took a deep breath and told him that I didn't want to be an insurance agent. I told him maybe I could become a teacher or a writer. I expected to have an argument on my hands, since the "And Son" story had been his dream; and I expected, frankly, to lose that argument. My Dad hadn't finished the 8th grade and his struggle to *make it* had been impressive. He had told me all my life that I needed to get an education so I wouldn't have to struggle. He had been proud to provide that "back seat" of security for me as I grew up. I didn't think he'd appreciate my interest in Shakespeare, Bach, and Heidegger. But, as great teachers often do, he surprised me. After a moment, he said (as if he had rehearsed it), "It is important to make plans for the future; as long as you are prepared to change them when the future comes." Then he said, "So tell me more about that Heidegger guy."

Now, fast forward two years to 1972, graduating with this particular degree, without an obvious "next thing" waiting for me, was a little like Charlie Brown's face in the cartoon ...



The future was all up to me, for the most part, and the rest of the world had no responsibility to make it work out all right. The days of sitting in the back seat of my parent's '56 Oldsmobile were long gone.

So, being out in the world was an adventure; but it was “the ‘70s” and I do remember being told — in movies and popular music — that it was supposed to be an adventure. I liked Helen Keller’s line: ...

“Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature,
nor do the children of men as a whole experience it.
Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure.
Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing.” — Helen Keller

As scary as it was, the adventure turned out all right. A teaching job materialized when I needed it, followed by a long career as a writer and editor. That was, frankly, the easy part. Today, the world is still changing dramatically, just as it was in 1972. The disarray of politics and the evolution of our musical heroes will continue to be part of that adventure for a long time. Heck, we are even likely to survive the adventure our government is providing today, as scary as it seems — AND, yes, Paul McCartney is still making music.

And Now, “So What?”

For me, and for many of you, the *REAL* challenge came with the arrival of children. Providing a “back seat” for my own young children “to fall asleep in” was clearly my responsibility. I came to realize that the great challenge of modern life may not be so much the fear that Charlie Brown and Peppermint Patty felt as they looked ahead to an uncertain future — they didn’t know it, but they would overcome it all just fine in their own good time. The challenge resided in the characters that we *never* met in Charles Schutz’ comic strip — the parents. That challenge in my own story rested with my Dad. At that time, he could have derailed my plans; he could have insisted that I complete my degree in the school of business and fulfill his “And Son” dream — he was, after all, paying the bills. His wisdom was to give me permission to pursue the “daring adventure” that Helen Keller spoke of. He had to take the risk that I could succeed going my own way. For that, I thank him today.

Recently, in a conversation with my son Matt about raising children (as he and his brothers are doing so well), he reminded me of something I quoted to him years ago from a book I read (“*How To Father*,” by Dr. Fitzhugh Dodson). The book asked, what is it that children, whether they know it or not, want most from their parents while they are growing up? The answer: “Risk with me while I’m trying on selves.”

“Risk with me while I’m trying on selves.”

I didn’t see that in the comic strip all those years ago; but today, as I look with admiration at children and grandchildren, just like those in the cartoon, I see that as the enduring message.

It was the _____ of times, it was the _____ of times, it was the age of _____, it was the age of _____, it was the epoch of _____, it was the epoch of _____, it was the season of _____, it was the season of _____, it was the spring of _____, it was the winter of _____.

— With thanks to Charles Dickens, from *A Tale of Two Cities*