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## Fundamentals



## Sidebar

# Sorry

by **Kenneth P. Nolan**  
Senior Editor

We hung out on the park side, drinking cold Bud in cardboard containers on those hot summer nights. The passing Coney Island Avenue buses were plastered with ads promising “3 days of peace and music.” Rock was our passion; we played it loud and constant driving our befuddled parents, who never understood nothing, crazy. So with four friends, I sent for tickets so we could spend the weekend in bucolic and serene Woodstock away from the steamy Brooklyn sidewalks.

Because we all had summer jobs and could only miss a day’s pay if we were dead, we met Friday evening in Farrell’s, watched the news, which was all about the thousands of hippies causing traffic jams and chaos. Hey, Hooley, that’s where we’re going, we told the bartender. You’re nuts, he said with a sly smile. So we had a few beers, piled into Wally Freitag’s car, and drove the winding back roads for hours to one of his relative’s homes that was somewhere near Woodstock. “The New York State Thruway’s closed, man.” We hung out until daybreak and then drove another few miles until we couldn’t and began walking. Still miles away and tired but who cared. We were a happening. We were going to change the world.

“It’s a free concert man.” We laid our two blankets on the grass far from the stage and marveled at the vast crowd of people like ourselves, young white college students with hair long, clothes ragged. “Don’t eat the brown acid. It’s a

bummer, man.” Pot, acid, mescaline—drugs were everywhere, people selling, everyone using. A half million of American’s best, or so we believed. No crime, no fights, no hassles. Just peace and love baby, peace and love.

“Gimme an F, gimme a U, gimme a C . . . what’s that spell?” sang Country Joe and the Fish. And like true believers, we shouted in response. The music started that clear Saturday afternoon and continued well into the next morn. Canned Heat, Santana, Mountain, Creedence, Jefferson Airplane, the Who, Sly, Janis, and many others. Nothing to eat or drink. Toilets stank and overflowed. But this was our nirvana—just us, the knowing, the kind. We will show the pig establishment, all those Nixon supporters like our parents. We were special—generous, caring, peaceful. We won’t hate. We won’t murder innocent Asians. We’ll end poverty, bigotry. And Woodstock was our debut.

Sunday the storms came and hundreds slid in the mud. “If we think really hard, maybe we can stop this rain. . . . No rain, no rain, no rain.” So we strolled the field, cold and wet but happy, confident. We were part of something noble, something

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pure. Because we never heard of trust funds, my friends and I had to work Monday. So we left late that Sunday afternoon and reversed the trek, arriving home just in time to bathe, eat, and jump on the F train to Manhattan. “Your father thought you were in Tanglewood,” my mother snapped as she tossed most of my muddy wet clothes in the garbage.

And now 40 years later, I look back at those chaotic yet wonderful times and shake my head in disbelief. Where did the promise, selflessness go? As Joni Mitchell sang, we were stardust, we were golden. How did we boomers—educated, idealistic—make such a mess? Why did we not, as Bobby Kennedy urged, make a better world? We enjoyed peace, prosperity, yet as we enter our Social Security years, we leave a legacy of strife and economic disaster. And our legal profession is in shambles with layoffs and more layoffs; deferring graduates, including my daughter, to 2010 or 11 or never. And it’s our fault, the fault of the Woodstock generation who had so much given and who squandered almost all.

My parents and their simple friends with no real formal education were the greatest generation. They survived the Depression, won the war, and never complained. Quit high school for a lousy job; spend three and a half years in Africa and Europe fighting Hitler. Hey, that’s life. This was typical of the neighborhood. They didn’t aspire to be millionaires and would never believe Marc Dreier was

miserable because he only earned 400 grand a year. They lived paycheck to paycheck and were happy to have a few bucks left over for Christmas presents.

But if they were the greatest, what are we boomers? Wait, before I indict everyone, I should clarify that I'm only talking about some of my generation. Most are good, responsible citizens—paying taxes, living within means. But a small cadre of Masters of the Universe at Lehman, Merrill, Goldman, AIG, Bear turned prosperity into, okay, I'll be kind, a deep recession. But if we look closely, we can identify similar, selfish values among many of my peers: I want as much as I can, and I don't give a crap about anyone else.

Like drugs taken at Woodstock, everything we did was in excess. Houses, cars, boats, sex. A generation that raged at their parents about greed and inequality gradually became narcissistic and materialistic. A comfortable home and lifestyle are nothing. Come see my

mc mansion and 50-foot yacht. Appearance is everything. Content of character means little. There's no "what's best for the company, community, country. . . ." It became "what's best for me."

Take the politicians. So easy. The phony "family is everything" guys who are the first to jump in the hot tub with interns. Or the thieves who cheat on taxes or obtain mortgages at below-market rates. Don't even get me started on New Jersey. George Bush. Did he really want to be President? Did he have the intellectual curiosity to better our nation? Bill Clinton coulda been a contender, but hubris and selfishness are much of his legacy. And it's no surprise that Joe Kennedy declined to run to succeed his uncle in the Senate. At one time, politics was public service. Now it's Joe Wilson screaming "You lie," or Charlie Rangel hoarding three rent-controlled apartments meant for the needy.

So somewhere and somehow in the many years since my hair was long, we

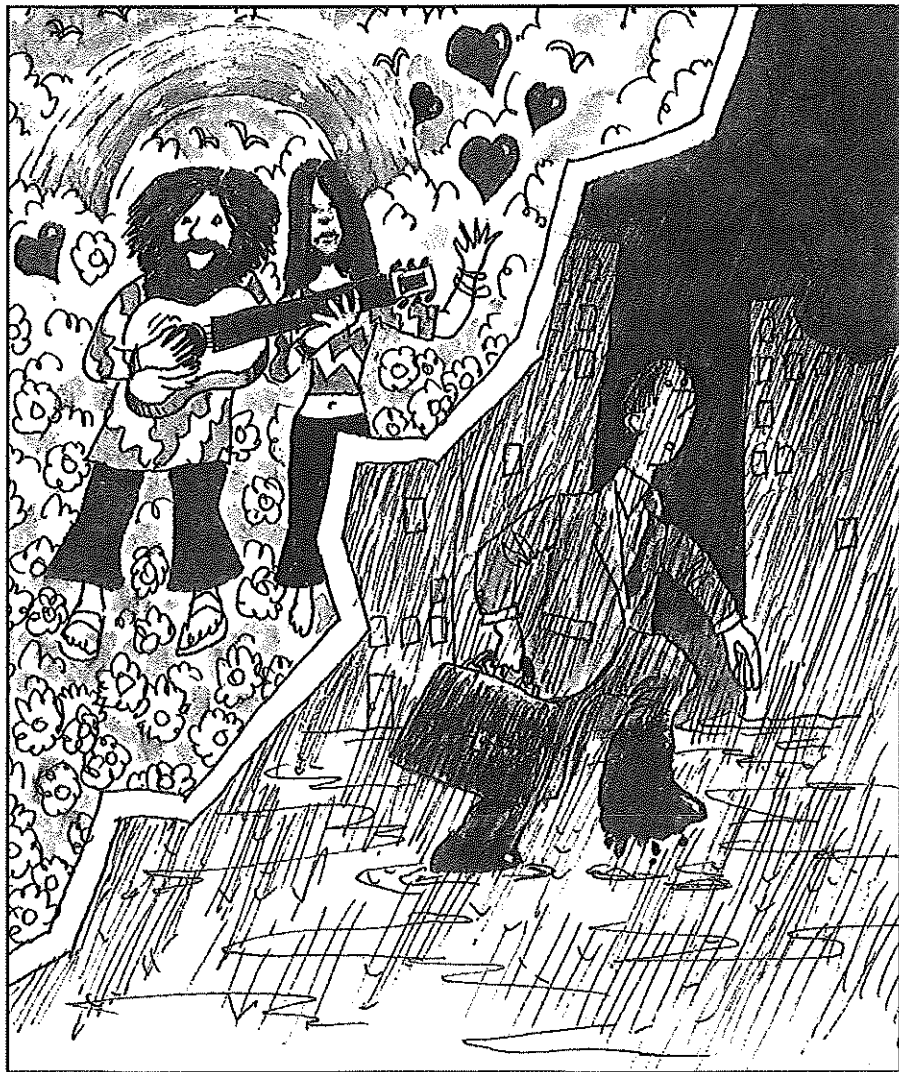
changed. The profession that was once law became a business. We didn't aspire to the Forbes 400, but we wanted our firm listed near the top in earnings in the *American Lawyer*. Personal happiness became equated with material success. Recently in the *New York Times* there was a story about a guy whose career took a turn for the worse and he told his wife that he didn't love her, never did, and wanted to move out. The wife refused to accept this and went about life with her kids as usual. Months later the guy, who physically never left, returned to the family.

She wrote: It's not land or a job or money that brings happiness. She knew this, but this dope didn't. His happiness was coupled with his economic condition. I could be similarly immature, but not my parents or their friends who never made more than a meager living. They overcame bigger challenges. They would never have blamed someone they loved.

Yeah we screwed up pretty good—the economy, the palpable hatred between liberals and conservatives, the failure to accept personal responsibility, the political correctness, the hypocrisy of "Do as I say, not as I do." We were given a world where America was admired and loved and now turn it over to our children and grandchildren as one where half the world wants to blow up the Statue of Liberty.

And our world of law is also being transformed. The big-firm model may no longer be viable. Smart, hardworking lawyers and staff have been shown the door. Salaries have been slashed. Summer programs severely curtailed or eliminated. Jobs, once a given, have evaporated, like those of so many auto workers in Michigan. Corporations will no longer pay higher and higher hourly rates. So those graduating from law school, deep in debt, are frightened. "[Law] was thought to be this green pasture of stability, a more comfortable life," one NYU law student was quoted in *The Times*. "It was almost written in stone that you'll end up in a law firm, almost like a birthright."

Media alert. No more birthright for you or any other very bright, very educated, very wonderful young person. It's gone. Or if not, at least no longer there for the foreseeable future. So why pay the exorbitant law school tuitions if no



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# Sidebar

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jobs exist? What does that portend for law schools; for firms, both big and small?

Perhaps I'm too pessimistic, perhaps, as my kids can prove, too cranky. After all, this recession was a natural result of excessive consumption, necessary to remind us—those who once knew but somehow forgot—that too much spending is never good. Especially if you don't have it. Imitating Rube Goldberg, our government has spent trillions more of what we don't have to limit the economic damage. I hope this time they know what they're doing.

I'm sure my mother, whose idea of air-conditioning was to ride the city buses for hours, using her senior citizen's discount, wouldn't understand all this debt. "Why should I buy an air conditioner and make Con Ed rich when I can ride the 5th Avenue bus, do my crossword, and talk to people?" But we are America, a shining city upon a hill, resilient and courageous. Soon the economy will prosper, and this dark period will seem a transient nightmare. Hope so.

So what have we learned? Let's look to our success story from the Bronx—Sonia Sotomayor. Lost her dad at nine, raised in the projects by a mother who sacrificed to send her and her brother, now a physician, to Catholic schools. And you know the rest. Yet, the judge worked too hard and long, ending her marriage after two years. When being sworn in for the Second Circuit, she admitted that her professional success did not bring her genuine personal happiness.

In the *Times* wedding announcements, a female radiologist, 60, was married for the first time. Her husband, also a physician, said: "I couldn't understand why she'd never gotten married because she's clearly a beautiful woman and intelligent and well rounded." The bride noted that her rewarding but grueling schedule meant that marriage didn't occur.

We men have it easy. We can work like maniacs, knowing that most times our wives make sure the kids get to school on time and do the stuff that we don't deem important. Sad but true. My wife and I and four other couples were

in an elevator on our way to a black-tie affair. An elderly woman entered and exclaimed how she felt safe among these big, strong men. "Useless," Cathie Gearity answered. "They're useless." The men thought it funny.

I don't have the magic elixir that provides sufficient time for a demanding job and being there when the first tooth is lost. But we have learned over these past 40 years that avarice and self-interest can gradually replace generosity and service, that material success ain't bad, but it doesn't make you happy, that professional accolades are satisfying, but they're not as fulfilling as true love and companionship. Perhaps it's not too late. □