

Ordinary.

Have ordinary people become nearly extinct during our lifetime? I remember ordinary people, and I remember there being a lot of ordinary people. If I remember correctly, there was almost an entire nation of ordinary people. I don't remember ever being ordinary myself, however. It used to be rare to meet a person who was not ordinary. For instance, a divorced woman raising her family alone was not ordinary; it was unusual. I never met a man raising his children by himself until much later in my life because, according to ordinary people, men could not raise children. A family having an income problem; was not ordinary; it was unusual. Drinking alcohol seemed to be one of our national pastimes even back then, but meeting a member of a family who was an alcoholic was not ordinary; it was unusual.

Smoking was very ordinary, and more than 40% of all adult Americans smoked during that ordinary time. Smokers smoked everywhere; there were ashtrays at the end of every aisle at Sears, ashtrays were in doctor's offices, and the doctor often smoked during your appointment. Ordinary meant men worked away from home, and women stayed and worked in the home. Ordinary meant that working a forty-hour week earned a sufficient income to buy a new three-bedroom, two-bath house with a two-car garage in suburbia, usually not far from a major city. The income from one person working was also adequate to afford a decent, working-class living, which consisted of having two cars, good, modern furniture, a television, and being able to pay the bills while also saving a little money every month. It was a life that was not extravagant, but it was not a poor life either.

There were specific rules that the majority of ordinary people followed. Swearing was not allowed almost anywhere, and children got a bar of soap in their mouths as punishment for

swearing. Usually, one time having a bar of soap pushed into your mouth was enough to teach you not to swear. Hats were always removed when going indoors, and if you were wearing a hat and a woman walked to where you were, you immediately removed it. If children were sitting in a room and an adult entered the room, the children immediately stood up and greeted that person. Telephones were originally party lines, which meant that when you used the phone, you first listened to ensure no one was already using the line. If someone was using the line, you hung up immediately unless it was an emergency, and then you would inform the other person of your trouble, and they would hang up. Manners and kindness were high on the lists of ordinary people. Ordinary people were kind and considerate to other ordinary people, and most showed off their manners almost all the time.

Neighbors playing card games was ordinary, and several times a month, adults would meet for drinks and to play cards. Rummy, Hearts, Canasta, Poker, and Whist were all popular, and there were always two rules to their socializing. Those two rules were not talking about religion and not talking about politics. Sometimes after a long evening of playing cards, the adults would begin to leave, and loud questions like “Do you want another drink for the road?” could be heard being asked. The neighborhood also kept watch on the children as they played outside and walked to and from school, and while there were no Neighborhood Watch signs posted, the neighbors did keep watch. Sometimes the young children were shocked to hear, for the first time, an adult or adults talk about black people disparagingly. But as they heard it more often, it became a part of their thought process. Some children didn’t like hearing their parents or other adults disparage others, while others didn’t mind. Some children adopted their parent’s viewpoints without question, while other children, also without question, didn’t adopt their parent’s views.

As televisions became prevalent in more and more homes during the early and mid-fifties, the news could be, and was, disseminated to more and more people. The news and other television shows were broadcast, showing the lives of ordinary people who were meeting other ordinary people from different backgrounds, states, and even ethnicities, thus allowing for a broad segment of society to meet and learn about one another for the first time. Television broadcasting stopped at midnight and came back on at 6 am. There were three channels available, and more got added as the popularity of television increased. Even the advent of advertising on television seemed to be an ordinary progression. It all seemed very ordinary. Ordinary people doing ordinary things was how America was for a long time.

No one seemed to question why the electric train lines were dug up. Ordinary people shrugged their shoulders as if it was some great mystery they could never unravel. The lines were dug up because electric trains running on steel wheels and tracks weren't using rubber tires or gasoline. In reality, GM, Firestone Tire, and Standard Oil of California conspired to gain control of transit companies in violation of the law. They succeeded in 25 cities before they were caught.

Ordinary people rarely, if ever, believed that conspiracies were taking place. Instead, they thought the government was honest and looking after their interests.

Meanwhile, a nuclear bomb was dropped on Frenchman Flat in Nevada on January 27, 1951.

Over the next forty years, over 1,000 nuclear explosions were detonated at the site. During the 1950s, the mushroom clouds from the 100 atmospheric tests could be seen from almost 100 miles away. The city of Las Vegas experienced noticeable seismic effects, and the mushroom clouds, which could be seen from downtown hotels, became tourist attractions. Westerly winds routinely carried the fallout from above-ground nuclear testing directly through St. George, Utah, and southern Utah. Increases in cancers, such as leukemia, lymphoma, thyroid, breast cancer,

melanoma, bone cancer, brain tumors, and gastrointestinal tract cancers, were reported from the mid-1950s onward. A further 828 nuclear tests were carried out underground. Despite knowing the effects of atomic fallout, scientists, under the watchful command of the United States government, kept the nuclear tests going.

One of the most significant splits between the Greatest Generation and those that followed was when people began to learn and eventually learned factually through the Freedom of Information Act that their government, the government they so loved and honored, had lied to them. And not only had they been lied to, but they'd been lied to repeatedly. The same government that these same ordinary people had sacrificed so much for, and in some cases had sacrificed their lives for, had and was still lying to them, brought about a series of minor revolutions. The implicit trust that had been the foundation of American Democracy was broken beyond repair. Money began to rule America openly, and money has not stopped ruling America, nor will it stop ruling America.

As America began to become a more inclusive society, fear and anxiety quickly developed. Many ordinary people also felt anger, apprehension, distrust, and insecurity because they had never known, worked, or lived beside people of different races. Women began getting hired for jobs that only men had worked at for as long as they all knew, and there was anger on both sides. To most people, these changes changed what was ordinary and what had been accepted as ordinary for generations. Ordinary had worked for an entire generation, and many ordinary people didn't want what was working to change.

Many women worked in factories during the Second World War, which brought about a feeling of emancipation. The proof was laid bare for all to see that women could and did have a viable

place in the workforce of America, and while it was not easy for many women, they pushed forward and persevered through the challenges placed before them.

An ordinary part of an entire generation was exchanged for changes almost everywhere, and that was finally when the ordinary faced extinction. The generation of ordinary people, mainly blue-collar workers, who went to work, bought what they could afford after having saved enough to buy it, and lived meaningful lives to them, began dying. Old age caught up to what is now called the Greatest Generation of ordinary people.

The Greatest Generation was known for economic success, technological advancements such as the radio and telephone, and the Great Depression and World War 2. Ordinary people were taught harsh lessons during their lives, and they sought to pass down the lessons they learned to their children. Their lessons included being taught a higher standard of personal responsibility, even as children. They learned modesty and humility by living through the scarcities of the decade-long Great Depression. They also learned a work ethic that enabled them to survive during the Depression and one world war. Many jobs were physically demanding with extended hours. Frugality was learned, so saving pennies helped families through times of shortage. “Use it up, fix it up, make it do, or do without” was a motto of their time. The commitment was legitimate for these ordinary people. One job and one marriage often lasted a lifetime. Integrity was paramount, as was self-sacrifice.

Astonishingly, 50 million men were registered into the Army during World War 2. 16 million served in the Army, and 2 million men went to Europe. These ordinary people did what they thought was best for themselves and everyone.

It is extraordinary to think of an entire generation of people as ordinary. And while I have not dwelt on the racial or gender injustices, nor the lies and conspiracies that made so many so much

money off the backs of the ordinary people that trusted them implicitly, that too seemed to be handled by those ordinary people in a way that was ordinary for them. Most people seemed content to mind their own business and let others live as they wanted. It was ordinary to think and live like that.

Indeed, many bad things got overlooked by the “a man’s home is his castle” outlook. Child and spousal abuse were rarely, if ever, reported. Millions of men returned from the war and returned to their families or started new families. I will never fully understand how many veterans did so well mentally and emotionally, except that many veterans of the war relied on their spouses or other veterans to remain strong. Remaining strong was an unspoken competition, but a competition, from each veteran’s heart to other veteran’s hearts, to be the best they could be.

Wives consoled their sometimes war-broken husbands, probably other wives reassured the abused wives of veterans who would emotionally and physically snap and become violent, and everyone did their best to survive the mental and emotional toll of their generation.

The time the generations before us lived was fraught with deep, existential problems. There was a World War, the Great Depression, which lasted for eleven years, and the Cold War between America and Russia, with nuclear proliferation and endless worry and stress. The military tested atomic bombs in Nevada, and a nuclear warning system was installed on electric poles across American cities. It was a very long period for the citizens of America to be under such intense stress and worry. A staggering number of children were born of this generation, later known as the Baby Boomers. In 1946 3.4 million babies were born; in 1947, another 3.8 million babies were born. The numbers kept rising, and 3.9 million babies were born in 1952, followed by more than 4 million babies born every year from 1954 until 1964, when the boom finally tapered off.

Startling enough are the medical studies that clearly show the effects of a mother's stress on her unborn baby, and medical studies show the long-term effects of deep stress on a child after birth. Of course, the human body will always try to mitigate adverse effects, so the placenta helps by filtering out high cortisol levels. Still, the physical, mental, and emotional impact of the Great Depression, followed by a World War that lasted from 1939 to 1945, would have caused numerous mental and emotional problems. More medical studies since then have shown positive and consistent evidence that maternal mood and caregiving behavior are associated with maternal and offspring cortisol levels. Simply put, increased cortisol levels in children are associated with impaired cognitive development.

How would ordinary people know how to cope with such an outcome? The how, what, and why of their life being turned upside for sixteen years, millions of men returning from war, millions of children being born, and needing to be raised in an emotionally secure environment, is mind-boggling. The fact that so many lived and grew up to be upstanding citizens is remarkable.

Ordinary people accepted racism as ordinary but soon began questioning why it existed, and many vowed to end it. On May 14, 1954, integration in schools started due to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, a landmark 1954 Supreme Court ruling that declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional. But in September 1957, the Little Rock Nine, a group of nine black students, enrolled at a formerly all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Their attendance at the school was a test of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. On September 4, 1957, the first day of classes at Central High, Governor Orval Faubus called in the Arkansas National Guard to block the Black students' entry into the high school. Later that month, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent federal troops to escort the Little Rock Nine into the

school. That drew national attention to the civil rights movement, and again television brought that news into many living rooms.

Ordinary people began to question and take part in righting the wrongs their ordinary complacency had affirmed. Television coverage was believed by those who watched it. Television coverage changed America in ways no one foresaw.

As television coverage began reporting the Vietnam War, as television coverage began showing the brutality of white police officers using their batons to beat black demonstrators, and as television began showing demonstrators of all ethnicities being beaten for simply demonstrating against a war or racist conditions, they felt were unjust, the pent-up anger and resentment for having been lied to for so long by the government these ordinary people had so completely trusted, literally burst the bubble of American's conforming to whatever their government told them. Chaos and riots were seemingly everywhere. In an apparent moment of panic, National Guardsmen fired 67 shots from M-1 rifles into a crowd of unarmed student demonstrators protesting the Vietnam War. Four students died, bullets injured another ten, and television crews reported the shooting.

Film from the Vietnam War staggered the American public as they learned first-hand that the war was not going as they had been told and that American troops were being killed at an alarming rate. The outrage that had begun in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, with writers and poets and folk and rock singers from across the social spectrum, had grown until it became a national uprising. Of course, not everyone wanted this change, and America was thrown into a hate-filled social confrontation.

Soon though, America pulled out of Vietnam, schools began to be integrated, and America seemingly changed forever.

There were still pockets of ordinary people dotted around America of diverse ethnicities. But soon, even their communities were forced to take a stand on where they stood in this newly morally awakened America. Because if being ordinary meant not caring about others being whipped and hung to death, then being ordinary was repulsive to many. If being ordinary meant hating others because of their skin color, religion, or sexual orientation, then it was offensive to many. And so, significant social change began in America. Many people soon realized that these changes could not happen fully until the ordinary elders passed on because their beliefs that being ordinary was okay were so profoundly ingrained that nothing except their death would end that belief.

Human beings do not forget easily. Whether that memory is in the mind, heart, or DNA doesn't matter. The parents who lived through the Great Depression and the Second World War passed on their emotional loads to their children. Their children were part of a new generation that never knew the ordinary. They would use the age-old saying, "This is ordinary for us," but that doesn't make it ordinary.

Ordinary people existed in the past. Those ordinary people are primarily extinct now. Especially once the internet and social media combined to allow everyone more than enough information, both true and false, to foster strong opinions. Opinionated people don't seem to believe facts or think that facts matter. The factual proof is compromised by conspiracy theories which many refer to as alternative facts. If ordinary people are sometimes right and sometimes wrong, and if ordinary people are rarely, if ever, mean or angry, then it does seem as if ordinary people are primarily extinct now. However, it does seem apropos that the definition of the ordinary is this: "not different, special, or unexpected in any way."

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © September 20th, 2022