

My Experiences with the Global Economy

The 50's and 60's were decades of opportunities with many part time and full time jobs - including work at photo processing labs (try to find one now which doesn't use a computer-driven process with a touch pad interface). Gas station attendants pumped gas and sometimes cleaned your windshield (the first compressed air type auto window washers and self-service stations signaled their disappearance). Canned food manufacturers made their own cans – but eventually this work was done by one of several can manufacturer conglomerates. The cost of the ingredients in the can was a significant part of the total cost of the product; now the packaging (Tetra Pak, microwavable pouches, etc.) along with distribution and advertising costs comprise most of the total product cost. Love those Focus Groups.

Automation in agriculture caused tomato soup makers to develop hybrid tomatoes which were uniform in size – the picking machines didn't like those beautiful large and misshapen ones though those were the best tasting ones. Even then these companies were using Argentine beef though this was never highlighted. Electricians could physically observe what was going on with an automated relay logic control system with timers and locking circuits – visual interfaces were often massive control panels adorned with plastic flow symbols, selector switches, push buttons and indicator lights. The control system design required painstaking efforts to document them on hard copy drawings; it was an art to fold a large (sometimes blue) print for inclusion in a proposal or operating manual -try to find one today without going on line.

The steel industry was a fat cat – large mills existed with employment at record levels. The lack of long range investment in modern plants and equipment, along with a financial model which couldn't survive foreign competition, was a sign of decline. The largest steel company budgeted certain amounts for vacation and time-off, and I recall getting surprise extra paycheck amounts because all of the budgeted funds had to be used in the budgeted fiscal year. That money could have been used for investment (a continuous caster at USS South Works may have left South Chicago in a much better place). Thirteen week vacations sounded wonderful – except many who qualified died shortly after their eligibility.

Coal fired power plants were chugging along with no thought ever given to using natural gas for major industrial manufacturing or power production. Natural gas was considered too clean to use this resource too quickly on a large scale. Fracking was not a viable approach as the cost of oil had not yet reached record levels (recent oil price declines are now impacting this technology). Combined cycle power generation using natural gas became a way of avoiding capital investment in other fossil fuel plants; new coal fired plants are doubtful in the US and nuclear plants are still not financially feasible – though one plant is now in the design/build phase. The lack of standardization of nuclear plant design in the US lengthened new plant approval beyond 20 years due to design flaws which surfaced each year a nuclear plant was in operation – discoveries made at one plant requiring design upgrades had to be applied across the board at other plants. You could thus not predict the cost of a new nuclear plant nor the time it would take to commission a new plant from conceptual stage. This resulted in major nuclear plant cancellations with enormous costs absorbed by the utility (and us).

Which brings me to think of the good, the bad and the ugly in today's changing world.

1. Social media technology forces us to look at things we would like to forget – even though we can continue to close our eyes to the madness around us, every now and then some reality sneaks in and we have to face our failures to be a civilized species.
2. Any first world attempts to eliminate child slavery pale in comparison to the 5 year olds making our shoes (etc. etc.etc.) in the “Developing Countries” (a euphemism for growing yet more one per centers who can enhance their personal wealth at others' expense).
3. Yes it was good to address slavery in the US (and in many European countries before we did), but did we accomplish anything? Lately any gains realized which attempted to bring more into the working class have been offset by voting impediments and the creation of another slave class working at subpar minimum wages and/or as “contractors” (to bypass payment of benefits). The institutions that were supposed to civilize and protect us (government, police, courts, families) have failed – drive through any urban or rural area and look at the blight our civilization has created.
4. Health concerns are still and will always be a concern to our frail human bodies. Take a pill for weight loss, blood pressure, anxiety, pain, you name it. Thank you medical profession for working so closely with the drug companies to undermine our personal responsibility to treat our bodies with care and with an awareness of long range implications if we do not. The recent randomness statistics regarding diseases such as cancer indicate that there is not much one can do to avoid certain diseases – getting sick appears to be a part of the human evolutionary experience. Those cell mutations apparently have a long term purpose. We will all get sick eventually, it isn't all in our control, and we will die (which is a part of living).
5. Free markets aren't free. Economics theories are excuses for trying to predict future outcomes by examining bits and pieces of information. Rationalization and justification of the present financial model and institutions just maintain a first world dominance using the IMF and World Bank as their tools. Financial industry oversight created after the Great Depression has been dismantled (poor Big Banks and Merrill – you deserve even more so go after it). Thanks also to all government watchdogs who have jumped ship and gone over to free enterprise. Lobbyists used to be called politicians before we made this a new job description.
6. Can the human beast be tamed? We can never go back (nor do we want to) to the time of small societies ruled by self control and self government and self policing, but the need for effective institutions in this modern age is still sorely needed. World domination by the few and powerful will keep us on a path of destruction. Maybe we need a world monarchy to tame the beast – gladiators prevail even today (rightists, leftists, extremists, conservatives, liberals, religious zealots, militarized police, professional sports, one true religions, status quo activists – name a few more on your own). Let's find a good Queen and King.
7. Majority rule was never what it was cracked up to be – think for yourself and look at reality.

End