

# Change-Personal Reflections

by Joseph P. Kennedy

1958 was a good year. In May of that year, I walked into the Northern Pacific Railway company general office in St. Paul and began my six years of employment. Blue suits, long sleeve white shirts and black shoes were the uniform of the day. Suits were in. Blue blazers were not. Long sleeves were in, short sleeves were definitely out and Friday optional dress hadn't even begun its gestation period. Air conditioning was a known term but not operational.

Northern Pacific was a railroad but I also received a lesson in timber, mining, corporate bonds and oil and gas. This land grant railroad operated between St. Paul and Seattle. It was known in the business as a Western railroad as opposed to the Eastern railroad. The Northern Pacific general office was located in one-half of a building. The other half of the building was the general office of Great Northern Railway. Also known as Jim Hill's railroad which also operated the furthest Northern Route between St. Paul and Seattle. Both the Northern Pacific and the Great Northern owned the CB&Q railroad which operated between Chicago and St. Paul. The CB&Q general office was located in Chicago.

The railroad industry was regulated by the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC). The thought of merging these three railroads (NP, GN, CB&Q) was a foreign thought. Competition was the magic word. Competition and therefore the public interest was best served by keeping these three railroads apart.

Times change, regulations loosened and the public interest was being redefined. What once was known as a "principle" was now known as an "accident." The national interest no longer had to depend upon the railroads for national security. The interstate Highway system was flourishing and the trucking industry became the 600 pound gorilla on the block. Eastern railroads began to flounder. The New York central and the Pennsylvania railroad experienced debt defaults. Times change, what was once the focus of government was reevaluated. Big was no longer bad, survival was good.

Who would have dreamed in 1958 that on March 2, 1970 the Northern Pacific, Great Northern, and the CB&Q would merge into a new company called Burlington Northern. The day after the merger (the Supreme Court gave it's blessing) the two offices became one. Sledge hammers opened the walls between the two buildings.

Change was just beginning. The corporate office was St. Paul. The Chicago office was closed. A new president decreed that Seattle would best serve the new entity. So called experts thought Chicago would have been a more logical choice but Seattle prevailed. Here it is 1997 and change continues. The natural resources owned by the railroads was formed into a new corporation and then sold. Extensive holdings of timber, land, coal, oil and gas were separated from the prime business of rail transportation.

Change continues. The Burlington was merged with the Atchison Topeka and the Santa Fe. Seattle was not deemed to be the general office, Topeka was the choice. What was once a substantial source of employment for St. Paul has ended. A satellite work force exists.

The biggest change awaits. There is no one transcontinental railroad. The dream exists that one day on a railroad would operate from the Atlantic ocean to the Pacific Railroad.

I have followed the Railroad industry for some forty years and never cease to be amazed at the changes that have occurred. The industry is not dynamic when compared to the computer industry but change does take place though the pace is slow.

It is rather interesting that in 1958 Pope Pius XII was presiding, Latin was the universal language of the Catholic Church, fish on Friday was on the American Catholic menu and Bishop Brady had begun his final church assignment. The College of St. Thomas enrollment was short of two thousand students, all male. (Summer sessions had some female students). The library as we know it today existed in the basement of the administration building.

### *Change*

How do we prepare ourselves for the world of change? Do we study change? Do we begin with the now? Can we learn anything from the past? How do we go about choosing a vocation? Are all changes variable or are some choices eternal? [But if all choices are variable is not this the same as saying all choices are variable except this one?] What to do? It is not easy. In the movie "The Graduate," Dustin Hoffman was told that "plastic" is the future. Had he received the same advice today he would have been told "software" and "computers" is where it is at. "E-Mail" and the internet will have to be mastered to ready oneself for the world of change.

A liberal arts background is the building block to a good education and to a good life. A Catholic liberal arts education adds a new dimension to the building blocks. Morality, good vs. evil, truth vs. falsity, prudence are woven into the fabric of every day life.

The building blocks of a liberal arts education is an understanding of communication be it reading, writing, or speaking. The arts give an understanding of self and the interaction with the rest of society. History and related fields tell us who we are as a people and where we come from. The world of science gives us insight into the world of absolutes. Over all of these subjects the concept of Catholic liberal arts apply a glue that pulls all the subject matter together.

The basic formula to that Catholic glue is that a person is created in the image of God, that God exists, and that a person has dignity. Simple thoughts, hopefully applied consistently.

A liberal arts education is intertwined in a professional education whether that field be medicine, law, engineering, accounting, management and business. The Catholic liberal arts tradition serves as a building block to a good education.

The world of business by its very nature is a world of change. Some changes are accidental in nature and some changes are principles. The principle change must be recognized and given its proper reflection.

In 1958 it was common for an employee to begin a 40 year relationship with one employer. Loyalty was a given. In today's business world we have the term "downsizing." Does loyalty apply now? Is this term loyalty an accident (temporal) vs. a principle (eternal).

In 1958 employers had pension plans for employees. In 1970 ERISA was written into law. Employees were free to leave their employer and take their pensions with them.

The world of change is made up of daily choices. Each business day we make choices. Hopefully we make choices following the Catholic liberal arts tradition. We should do it as a matter of habit. Not all choices are major decisions but we prepare ourselves for major decisions by making daily choices consistent with our liberal arts background. Spike Lee said it well- "Do the right thing" or as the Mennonites put it - "If it isn't right, don't do it." I'm not quite sure what "right" is but if I make choices consistent with my background then I'm not far afield.