

LONGWORTH

J. RUSSELL SMITH

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Longworth

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Chapter One

I suppose everyone has his or her demons. One does not navigate the waters of life, the hills and valleys of everyday existence without confrontation, indecision, frustration, and, on occasion, heartbreak. In fact, for many, life is one continuous struggle. For others, and there are a few, the challenges of life are welcomed like so much nectar. Those people are to be envied. In the case of our protagonist, the frustrations of attempting to understand and to make sense of the actions of his fellow man do, at times, take a toll; so much so, in fact, that the black of night can be a very Byzantine period. The out-of-body experiences--some would say dreams--are not always pleasant. In fact, they can sometimes be described as convoluted, fraught with graphic activity. Damnably personal, or so it seems. But all too often, these dreams are dramatic and intense. Yes, very intense, like they were meant to leave an indelible message.

Why do these moments of cowardly distraction invade what should be a period of gentle reflection? Why can he not have “normal” dreams like most everyone else? Why have his bordered on the descriptively grotesque? His dreams weren’t always this way--only as he grew more aware. As time moves inexorably along, driven either by circumstance or natural progression, and as it grows shorter for all of us, I suppose the sense of urgency becomes more acute. Is this a punishment for some unknown failure? Do we have to deal with our nocturnal demons to ensure the vivification of our waking life? Why, for some, must there be a wracking of the soul in order to discover what makes everything function...to make sense out of any or everything? Or is this simply a symptom of one’s inability to function in society? Who knows, but the trip to self-discovery can be very painful.

That should bring us to the point. How can one make the most of the opportunity given to each of us, as we inhabit this earth? Is it destined for the collective community to prevail and prosper and are we, as individuals, inevitably ordained to lead “lives of quiet desperation”? Or do we have choices on the individual level that can be controlled by our own desires and direction? Why do some of us accept our lot in life and others question everything? It seems that Carson Longworth is one of those fellows who simply cannot accept things as they appear. He wants to know why things are as they are or at least appear to be. Yes, indeed, Carson Longworth is one of those unfortunate souls who will have a gut-wrenching time trying to find out precisely how he fits into society. His will be a journey of sometimes torturous

proportions that can be circumscribed only by his imagination.

By all rights, Carson Longworth should have led a storied and, for all purposes, accommodating life. There was nothing to suggest that he would be a contrarian toward the here and now, unless, of course, one knew him...and few did. He was intelligent, charismatic, fun-loving, good-looking (but, also a little eccentric); he “had it all,” as they say--all of the tools to lead a relatively normal and unquestioning life. Why did he insist on the “road less traveled”? Why not just get along? It is and would have been so much easier.

It has also been said that Carson had a “mystique.” Maybe these are precisely the reasons why he found it so difficult to put up with the nonsense that he encountered on a daily basis. Was he so different from many in his insistence on the notion of fair play in his dealings with others, on his appeal to logic in a world where greed and a self-serving attitude ruled the day? Not really! In fact, he suspected that others were just as unhappy and frustrated as he. He just happened to be one of those that, perhaps in a quixotic fashion, tended to attack those very ideas in people and society that were not based on any logic or a sense of fair play, but rather on something else entirely. Who was the Roman Catholic patron saint of lost or desperate causes? I believe it was Saint Jude. This was definitely his patron saint, for he unrelentingly championed the underdog. He was constantly challenging what he perceived to be the inanity of the unexamined, the accepted notions of the day. It was a tiring enterprise, but one he simply could not ignore. It was too important to be left unaddressed...or so he perceived.



If one moves around a lot in life many things can, and often do, happen. Some good, some not so good. For one thing, one sees the world differently than others who have lived in one place their entire lives or have ventured barely beyond their horizon. Peregrinations, be they short in duration or a permanent relocation, can be, in the estimation of some, very beneficial, as they tend to broaden one's outlook. On the other hand, there are no real memories of “playing in the sand box with little Johnny or Susie.” That, as has been noted many times, by leading authorities, is not so good. There are some who think it's important to have reference points in life. There is something reassuring about remembering a particular incident with a particular person. It helps to define oneself, at least at that moment. If the names and faces are a blur, then the people are less important than where you lived or what you might have done. Most think that people and relationships are important. If you don't have that reference, your interaction with people tends to be less fulfilling, or at least more challenging. Perhaps you

simply don't allow yourself the beneficial feeling that comes with opening the heart, in trusting people. That, most would agree, is not so good.

Carson lived in a world of relative plenty. To quote the famous adage from Calvin Coolidge, the 30th President of the United States, "the business of America is business." In fact, Carson believed this to be true, at least in the beginning. That, in his eyes, was both sad and generative. It was sad, because, he believed, one needs more than just the quest for money to satisfy one's life. On the other hand, it can be very productive if the political system allows for (and it does) the unfettered thirst for economic production that permits a better material lifestyle. It can also allow for creativity in the arts. Now that was good, he felt. So what does one do? If there are too many freedoms, it's easy to justify most anything. If there are not enough (whatever that means) the creative juices cease to flow. Then again, most of the truly creative art is born out of deprivation, pain, suffering, or generally a feeling of "not being with the program." In essence, Carson was constantly at odds with both himself and "the system"...increasingly so as he gained his majority.

Carson's life had been punctuated with journeys to a great many places. He had traveled and lived throughout the United States. He had fought in a war far from home. He had traveled and lived in places as far afield as Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia, Canada, Central America, and the Caribbean. He had a broad knowledge of the world and, quite frankly, bathed in that knowledge. From his vantage point, having come of age during the 1960s, he became embittered by what he and others saw as the downward spiral of America toward some bottomless abyss of non-caring folk who felt nothing for their fellow man. They would, in his estimation, rather reach for that illusory "American Dream," which meant the acquisition of material goods and a nice house in the suburbs. Now, there might have been nothing inherently wrong with that picture, but at what cost, and at what sacrifice?

Being a child of the 1960s was not an easy thing to be. Carson, like many of his contemporaries, grew up thinking that he should pursue that "American Dream," but tended to reject the outright pursuit of material goods in the absence of something more meaningful. Yes, it does sound like spoiled kids in this land of plenty, but his was the first generation ever in the United States that tried to turn the status quo on its head. That's not to suggest that others did not rebel against their parents; they did. The American Civil War split families and this nation apart to the point where, it can be argued, it has never fully recovered. And that was over a hundred and fifty years ago! But that was fundamentally and arguably different from the experiences of the 1960s. While there was indeed a war going on, it served as a backdrop to

what was happening in the homes, in the universities, and on the streets. Many have maintained that were it not for the Vietnam War, which, they argued, served as the catalyst for the '60s, little of this would have happened. Perhaps so, but the point is that it did happen. There was a rebellion by the youth against established and accepted norms, not the North versus the South, like this country had never seen before.

Everything that happened in Carson's life, it should come as no surprise, contributed to his make-up, to his outlook. While that, in and of itself, is not particularly noteworthy, the fact that the country had taken a turn for the worse in recent years, was cause for consternation. Everybody seemed to be rejecting all of those ethereal '60s notions of love thy neighbor, a sense of fair play, and all of the other Judeo-Christian homilies that fewer seem to adhere to in his world. This was troublesome to him. That was one of the foremost reasons why he increasingly had little time for people; certainly less and less time for small talk.

Now it's rather difficult to function in this world if you don't care to interact with people. They are, to put it mildly, a necessary evil if one is to go about the day-to-day activities of "putting beans on the table" and to socially adapt to one's environment. It is generally agreed that man is a social animal. Most would not argue with that assertion. Be that as it may, Carson had reached a point in his life when small talk was getting painful. He simply wanted to do something that had some meaning other than selling something to somebody who either didn't need it or could have used something just as practical or useful for far less money. But that, of course, is not the point. We are a country, he reasoned, whose primary purpose is to market our goods, whether they are groceries, cosmetics, shoes, pharmaceuticals, clothing, or whatever. Do we really need designer or brand-name pills when generic ones will do nicely, thank you?

Carson was conversing with one of his colleagues one day (although it could have been one of any number of days, since this preyed on his mind constantly) about the very notion of conspicuous consumption. "We have all watched television," he opined, "where, during an advertisement, we are told that our lives will be that much less meaningful if we don't use so-and-so's detergent instead of brand X. In fact," he continued, "most of the time, brand X is just as good as or better than the newly fortified brand that costs twice as much. Myriad studies have been conducted on most cosmetics where the general conclusion is that the less sexy one is perfectly satisfactory. But can we live without the sexy one? Heavens no!! We must have the sexy one, because we will be the envy of our peers.

“The designer watch makers don’t even pretend that theirs will keep better time. With the advent of quartz, you have bargain basement watches that keep nearly perfect time. Does anyone really need that \$10,000 watch? I don’t think so, but we strive for it anyway. It simply becomes an additional adornment that has intrinsic value only to its owner.”

This particular colleague, Adam, was one of those who had gone to college and studied nothing but business. Again, our friend Cal said that “the business of America is business,” so this is not an unusual track for one of our young stallions to follow. It just happens to be, in Carson’s opinion, a terribly myopic course to follow. How can one possibly understand his or her surroundings without the knowledge of our laws, our history, current events, religion, and a number of other disciplines that go into making each of us a complete human being?

Adam responded to Carson’s cries by stating, “It is because of those strivings to better oneself that this country has made itself a great one. How can we possibly hope to raise ourselves to a higher level if we continue to settle for the ordinary?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t buy that,” Carson countered. “Are you suggesting that we must continue to pursue material wealth in order to advance in your Spenserian ‘survival of the fittest’ world? Are you suggesting that only those who possess diamonds and other expensive trinkets can lay claim to superiority?”

“No, of course not,” Adam declared. “What I’m trying to tell you is that if we don’t continue to allow the unfettered marketplace, and those entrepreneurs within it, to function without interference, we’ll find ourselves behind the eight ball. It’s mankind’s nature to progress.”

“Now that’s interesting,” Carson noted. “You’ve detoured from your original argument about why it is that we must strive for the expensive--and in the estimation of many, unnecessary--items in life when more pedestrian ones will do quite nicely. Or was that your position at all? I’m confused. Shall we stick with that train of thought, or should we digress? Or are you on the same train of thought?”

“Indeed I am, Mr. Longworth. What you don’t seem to understand is the correlation between the two. There’s nothing inherently wrong with striving for what you would call the unnecessary things in life. That is, if one has the means to attain what for him, we will use men as an example, but it applies to women a well, would be a status symbol, then he should be allowed to follow his dream...as long as it’s not gained at the expense of someone else.”

“I’m still sorry,” Carson responded with a grin, “but I’m not following you at all. What does this have to do with the *type* of item one chooses? I thought we were talkin’ about why one would wear a \$10,000 watch when one costing less than \$100 would function just as nicely. Our discussion at this moment is not about striving to make your lot in life a little better, but rather what Thorstein Veblen, a social conscience of the 20th century, called ‘Conspicuous Consumption’. Is it enough to clothe oneself with simple attire, for example, or should one choose the very finest fabrics?”

“Wait a minute, Carson. We’ve gotten far afield in our discussion. Let’s get back to my point. I simply stated that there was nothing inherently wrong with the pursuit of the finer things in life provided the acquisitions do not come at the expense of another.”

“Aha--I think you truly believe this stuff. The beauty of unfettered capitalism,” Carson responded with a smile. “I would suggest that it always comes at the expense of another. There are precious few instances in the history of mankind where the majority was not oppressed by a ‘select’ minority. But this begs the point. You still haven’t addressed the correlation between the two nor have you addressed how all of this affects the common man in his interactions with others. Perhaps we can get to that later.

“Let me ask you a general question. Do you or do you not see that the pursuit and acquisition of what many would consider outlandish material goods is a total waste of resources and has, at its root, the makings of elitism? Inherent in that would be the implied assumption that your car/watch/suit or whatever is not as ‘good’ as mine; hence you, as a person, are neither as good nor as smart as I am?”

Adam, of course, suggested that one had nothing to do with the other, that one is free to choose what he can afford irrespective of what that means in the eyes of others. “That is precisely what is wrong with our society today,” Carson fired back. “Not only do we not examine our own lives, but we don’t examine the consequences of our actions. Most people don’t realize, I would suggest, that there is this tacit understanding that those with the most money are somehow superior to others, that they are smarter. And that’s where we part company, Adam. I don’t think you’ll ever understand that your thought process, as reflected in your actions, dictates how we conduct ourselves with our fellow man in this society. Most people in the business world don’t understand that we should first become human beings before we become the chairman of General Motors.”



Carson had determined long ago that there were a great many things right with our universe. For instance, it appeared obvious to him that there are times and there are places that shape specific incidents. Timing is everything, as it is said. Would Abraham Lincoln, one of our finest presidents, be remembered as fondly today as he is had it not been for the Civil War? Would the Lincoln/Douglas debates have had the same import if subsequent events had not unfolded as they did? Not likely. It is often a crisis that determines how one is remembered.

Some would argue that John F. Kennedy, remembered fondly as a guiding force, would not be as revered today had he continued his presidency to its ultimate conclusion. His relatively early assassination rendered moot the entire question of just how good a job he did as President of the United States. Many would argue that he lives in the minds of most today, not because of his accomplishments as president, but rather because of how he made us feel as human beings, how he appealed to our civic pride. Kennedy, in fact, made some egregious blunders. The Bay of Pigs was one of the more notable. His encouragement of our active participation in what became the Vietnam conflict was another. But that's all forgotten, or at least pushed aside, because he was a young, energetic man with the requisite wife sporting the appropriate pedigree. And, of course, he became a symbol to which we could aspire.

While we could not see ourselves as quite like him (he was, after all, a Kennedy, in the minds of many as close as we have had to aristocracy in this country), we could aspire to the ideas and programs that he represented. More importantly, however, was the notion that had he lived longer, he would surely have done great things for our country. Upon reflection, it is obvious that we needed heroes in that era. We need them now as well, but that is a whole different story as one traces what has transpired on the world stage since 1963.

Understanding that there are a great many things "right" with our world, Carson nevertheless continued to mull over the various incidents in life that tend to shape our souls. Why is it, he asked himself, that most of the great writers have historically been somewhat "out of sorts," either with themselves or the world at large? Why is it that we have to go through some sort of trial by ordeal before we are able to understand what is transpiring around us? Certainly there are those who see clearly without having to examine such things. Take Carson's colleague Adam. To him, and many others like him--which is to say, most of the people on this planet or certainly in the United States--the givens are obvious and not to be questioned. Things are as they are and shall be. For Carson, and a few others like him, that was not acceptable. There is too much unnecessary strife in the world today for everything to be accepted "as they are and shall be."

Why, for instance, is the United States, the richest and most powerful nation on earth, incapable of offering universal health coverage to all of its citizens? It is criminal, according to Carson, that we do not take care of those least capable of caring for themselves. There is now and probably always will be a certain segment of society incapable of taking advantage of “the system.” For those, there should be a safety net whereby they will be protected and offered the most basic of necessities, like health care and enough food to eat. Should society at large care for these individuals or should they be left to drift, as is the case now, in the sea of plenty? Most fail to recognize that to ignore the body politic ultimately costs us a great deal both morally and financially.

Carson was pondering the above one day when he happened to switch on the television. There was a program on one of the major commercial television stations, where several females were parading themselves in front of and fawning over a very wealthy male in hopes that he would choose her as his bride, wedding gown and all. This particular program happened to garner one of the highest ratings for that particular week. To many this was a simple gimmick. To others, this represented much of what is wrong with our society. Women were depicted as helpless individuals who could not function without a man. In order for a woman to be considered a success, she had to be married. In fact, she was so desperate that she was willing to don a wedding dress, to be paraded before the world stage, like a prize cow, with the hope that she would be selected as the bride of this millionaire. The fact that she did not know this male millionaire seemed of little importance. The only thing that mattered was that she was to be married. It is telling that the majority of the watchers of this program were women, young and old.

What does this say about our society? Does a woman have to be married to be considered a “whole” woman? This, coming from a society that, in this day and age, purports to be an enlightened one. We are not talking about a society that is still socially feudal in nature--that is to say, one that treats its women as second-class citizens like so many other cultures on this planet. Carson, as has been mentioned, had traveled through and lived in many different countries, witnessing the mores that pass for culture in a great many societies. While it is a fact, if not an acceptable one, that many cultures treat certain segments of its polity as second-class citizens, the United States is not one of those. At least that is the official position. And yet we find ourselves, either tacitly or directly, perpetuating those stereotypes that we have fought so long and hard to overcome. This could also be posited for the minorities in our culture as well, but alas, that is another story.

Carson took it upon himself, in the continual striving to understand why it is that we do what we do, to better understand what was happening with this phenomenon. In the wake of this extraordinary event, he discussed this with a number of men and women in the general populace. “Why,” he asked one enlightened woman that he knows, “is it that this television program was such an overwhelming success?” The answer he got was shocking to his sensibilities. This woman, Sydney, responded by stating, “Whether or not we want to admit it, this is still a man’s world. As women, we must take what we can get.”

This came from a woman who had conquered the “man’s world” in the most fundamental sense. She was a businesswoman who, by virtually any measure, was considered a societal success. Forget the tired notion that she played by a man’s rules and prevailed. She “had it all”: a successful career, a wonderful, married home life, beautiful kids, a house in the suburbs, and everything else that is considered *de rigueur* in the United States. And yet, she watched this program intently and with some envy. Why? Was her life missing something? Was she really a “success” as defined by our standards? She couldn’t tell Carson why this program held such an attraction for her--just that she still yearned for Prince Charming to come “rescue” her. What did all that mean? Rescue her from what? That she could not answer.

In questioning his friend, Phil, on the same subject, Carson received an answer that was not so different from Sydney’s. “In our society,” opined Phil, “there remains the idea that there is indeed this concept that life is meant to be other than what it actually is. The white knight should come sweeping by and rescue the fair maiden from her straits.” What that meant, he couldn’t really explain.

“Does this mean that we simply exist for some indefinable purpose?” Carson asked. “Does it mean that regardless of what we attain or how we live, it’s simply not enough? If that’s the case,” he concluded, “then there’s very little hope for us as human beings. If we cannot realize our dreams in a society as socially advanced as ours, then there is very little hope for our future. Are we right in assuming, as the Judeo-Christian universe would have us believe, that regardless of how we live our lives on earth, it’s simply not enough, that we will be judged by our actions in the here and now and be relegated to an appropriate place in the hereafter?”

To Carson this was unacceptable and yet he was faced with the near irrefutable evidence that there were “enlightened” people out there who considered this program perfectly appropriate--or if not appropriate, at least reality.

Is it true that we cannot escape our destiny, whatever that means? Can we possibly live our

lives on a level that makes us happy in the here and now? Or is our existence a pure fantasy? Carson found it hard to believe that we could not attain some sort of level of satisfaction, if not Nirvana, that would allow us to be happy with our personal attainments. After all, he knew plenty of people who were happy with their existence. Or were they? Were they just kidding themselves? He thought not and yet why the attraction of this silly television program that held the attention of so many?



Carson's contribution to society came in many forms, at least as far as he was concerned. He looked at society, at least in the United States, as a challenge to be understood and, perhaps, explained. If we are a society that judges our citizens by what they have accomplished, then it is high time to determine what is meant by accomplishment. Is it fair to say that our material accomplishments determine our worth? Are the ones who attain vast wealth to be emulated? Is it fair to say that the most worthy in our society are the ones who attain the most material goods? Carson didn't think so, and he would have this compulsion to ferret out his version of the truth. All of these dialectical gyrations, however, would come when he had his great awakening. He would come to challenge the norms, seek the higher "truth," as it might be understood, and try to understand the society around him at some point. During the early years, however, it was a completely different story.

Until he had joined the military--out of necessity as there was a war going on and he was about to be drafted anyway--Carson had lived with the certainty that nothing much was important except girls and having a good time. He had pretty much had his pick of women for as long as he could remember. He also managed to not enjoy a lasting relationship with any one girl, as he was continually moving; along with that tendency comes apprehension and indecision. Also, he was always up for a party, which often meant a different girl. For some inexplicable reason, perhaps because everything had come so easily for him, the thought never crossed his mind that he might actually have to confront the world at large and live amongst a bunch of people with whom he shared little in common. Truth be told, he was not altogether certain of what he believed when he was in school, as he had never given the world at large a good deal of thought. Again, at this point, girls and parties were all that mattered.

Carson had been pretty much a loner throughout his formative years and this was to continue through adulthood. While he rather easily insinuated himself into the "in-crowd" wherever he went, he never really felt a part of that or any crowd. Perhaps it was because

they had a long history with each other and he had no history with anybody outside of his family and even that was suspect. There was a time when he was moving from one town to another and had a choice of spending his last night in that town with his current best friend or at the hotel where his parents were staying prior to departing the next morning. For some unknown reason, even to him, he chose to stay in the hotel. There was this sense of impermanence that affected his thought process and that mindset would continue throughout his life.

Because he was able to “fit in” as he did, he was able to do a good many things that others could not. He was able to “get the girl” that others had wanted. He was able, without really trying, to engender curiosity. There was, as has been mentioned, this mystique about him that no one really understood, not even him. Because he had always considered himself an outsider, his actions often conferred the perception that he was aloof and arrogant. While there might have been some truth to that, it was more properly because he simply felt a little uncomfortable. If there is no greater meaning in life than chasing girls and having a party, what use is there in engaging in idle conversation--unless of course, that conversation involved girls? Even at that, though, he knew something was missing.

It has already been mentioned that Carson lived in a world of relative plenty, at least materially. While he did not want for much in the traditional sense, he yearned for something more meaningful in the sense of lost community. Is it better, he asked himself, to simply drift through life without a sense of purpose or was there a purpose that he simply didn't understand? He suspected that most people merely existed and didn't give a good deal of thought to what makes us who and what we are. Why, for instance, did some of us appear to know what we were doing, almost from day one, while others were content to pursue the more mundane aspects of life, such as going to college and studying something like business or engineering...practical studies that would stand one in good stead when they were ready to enter the “real” world? Or did those people really know what they were doing...those individuals who studied hard, made good grades, and then went to the appropriate schools?

Carson had maintained a friendship with one of his high school buddies throughout the years. There was a truly enigmatic relationship with this individual. Baxter Layne was his name. Baxter had been his best friend for what seemed like forever. They had become friends when Carson moved to Oklahoma City for his high school years. Superficially, there was little reason for this relationship. Baxter was a very serious individual who, probably because of his own demons, approached life as if he were lost. While he attended the best schools,

Dartmouth and then Berkeley, he was continually looking for attachments. He seemed to envy those who had gone through some sort of passage. While he had managed to stay out of the Vietnam War through student deferments in the '60s, he envied those who had suffered through the experience--the rite of passage, as it were. He had attempted to join the Navy as an officer, but was turned down when his intellectual pretensions got in the way. The United States Navy was not looking for leaders whose ideas did not exactly mesh with the governmental line. He can be forgiven for that, because this was a time when the good guys and the bad guys could not be easily separated or even identified. In order to avoid later conscription into the Army, and a possible tour in Vietnam, he ended up joining the Army Reserve as a simple private.

Carson's relationship with Baxter was always something of a puzzle. Their interaction with each other, while perhaps making some sense at the time, as they attempted to navigate the sometimes treacherous high school waters, seems to have been one in which two individuals tried to rise above the day-to-day minutiae while, at the same time, defining their existence by whom they dated and what parties and dances they attended. Theirs was a relationship shaped more by necessity than an actual attraction to one another. He later supposed that the attraction might have been because they were both outsiders who happened to be accepted by those on the inside. For some reason, Baxter treated this relationship in a much more serious manner than did Carson. They were two eccentrics who migrated toward one another. As Carson was to discover later, there are a number of different sorts of friendships/relationships. Those that he forged in the days of the Vietnam War would be true and lasting. This one would not.

Baxter made it too difficult to maintain a true friendship, as the years inched along. I suppose Baxter was a bit jealous of Carson or so it seemed. Baxter alternately praised and belittled Carson, which inevitably led to a tiring of the games. True friends allow each other to just be, to live their lives in total acceptance of who and what they are and have and will become. True friends are like an old shirt. You just feel very comfortable around them. You can say and do what you please with the total expectation that your actions will neither arouse nor surprise. That was not the case with Baxter. And that is a shame, because there was tremendous potential there. As one grows older, one begins to cherish things like friendships and relationships over material goods. Even the most devoted capitalists would agree with that assertion.



Carson's entire existence, prior to the Vietnam War era, consisted almost entirely of listening to music, dancing, dating, watching movies, and generally socializing. Having fun was the name of the game. The world outside of his circle of friends was of little interest. (Boy, would that change, and not so far into the future. Carson certainly came to understand how most individuals in the US consider their world to be all that is important. It means little to most individuals, nor do they really care or understand, what is happening outside of their hometown or state.)

The real era of what became known as the '60s began sometime around 1963/64 and ended at the conclusion of the Vietnam War. So the first few years of the '70s were really a part of that era. While that era has been examined and re-examined to death, it cannot be doubted that this was a phenomenon unlike anything this country had ever witnessed before or since. It was a defining moment like few in history. This entire era influenced not just the youth in America, but around the world as well. If US military might became pronounced and undeniable during and after the Second World War, then the realization of US cultural prowess and potential, for better or for worse, became a dominant force that began in the '60s and continues to this day. The militarism that the United States would continue to display for the entire world to witness will contribute to its downfall, but, for the moment, that was not easily recognized.

Prior to the '60s, there was a conformity that existed in the minds of virtually all of Western society. One knew his or her place in society and was expected to play the appropriate role. The middle class, due in large part to the stunning aftereffects of the Second World War, grew in number and importance. Many of the returning soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines took advantage of government subsidies, like the GI Bill, which permitted an elevation of their status in society to an unprecedented point in US history. In increasing numbers, the middle class was becoming a force to be reckoned with. Coincidentally, though, the middle class wanted a place, a niche in society. That included homeownership, a shiny new car, new appliances, and other accoutrements that would indicate that they had "arrived." While it was understandable that these young men and women would strive for some stability, given the fact that the first half of the twentieth century had witnessed two catastrophic wars, along with the much maligned and underappreciated Korean "conflict," and a devastating depression, it also created a conformity that would prove to be incredibly stifling to their children. In the minds of these young middle-class men and women, they had fought a war for the privilege of preserving the American way of life (whatever that meant). It should be quite enough to go to

work for a corporation and remain there for life. Or at least one would hope. Why would anyone question that, it was reasoned. It made for a nice, stable, productive, and presumably, happy life.

This mindset was reflected in the emerging medium of television and the resultant advertisements showing the material goods that every good American would and should surely want for his/her home. It was reflected in the housing that was being constructed or had been constructed post-WWII. The Levittowns around the country were vanilla-type tract housing that were designed to put as many people into homes as possible; very much like Henry Ford accomplished with his Model-T in the early part of the century. They all looked alike--or, rather, had little to distinguish themselves from one another. This was perfectly acceptable to a generation that had witnessed devastation and relative deprivation. There was a clamoring for stability, an eagerness to be a part of that segment of society that offered an opportunity for something better, yet it remained a colorless, unquestioning stratum of society that simply accepted most everything as it was. The perfect reflection of this attitude was the president that the US voters chose in the 1950s...Dwight David Eisenhower. Many have argued that he was the perfect president for the times.

Eisenhower was a war hero to all and a father figure to most. The fact that, in the estimation of most, he accomplished absolutely nothing during his eight years in office mattered little. He was an icon of stability, along the lines of George Washington, without the gravitas. He was not a politician, but he was a leader and a representation of all that was "American" and that was what they perceived to be needed at this juncture in history.

There was such a surge of patriotism after the Second World War that to question the leadership or even the intentions of those connected with or representing the United States was considered blasphemous. The early '50s witnessed the rise of McCarthyism. "Tail gunner" Joseph McCarthy, a US senator from Wisconsin, rose to prominence primarily on his "red-baiting" tactics. McCarthyism began to represent the witch-hunt against all of those whom the establishment perceived to be somehow against or anathema to mainstream idealism...i.e., the good old red, white, and blue. Even though the Soviet Union had been our uneasy allies during the Second World War, their brand of politics – Communism – was anathema to our way of thinking. "The reds want to take away everything we have. Better dead than red" was the common refrain that permeated society during this time period. Because of this, McCarthy and his cronies were successful in destroying the lives of some very good people who were not jingoists. They were people trying to live their lives unencumbered, but, because they would

not succumb to the gangster-like tactics of McCarthy and his people and pledge their undying allegiance to his cause, they were smeared and ruined. The point is that he was able to get away with this type of behavior, because the society of the time demanded unquestioned fealty to the notion of unbridled American Exceptionalism. That is one of the many reasons why, when the 1960s unfolded, there was such a generational gap between the parents and the youngsters who came of age in the 1960s.

This gap was initially reflected not in the opposing views on the Vietnam War, but rather in music. When Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, many of the black blues singers, and others introduced rock-and-roll, it was just what the youngsters wanted and needed. They were choking under the yoke of conformity. They wanted to have some fun, to dance and party like there was no tomorrow. (This generation, unlike their parents, had not suffered through deprivation, thus the notion of sacrifice was not ingrained.) There were changes coming that would shake the very foundation of US society. For Carson, all of these changes were to play a major role in his development and his outlook on the world in general. Prior to his personal involvement in the war, however, Carson felt like so many others in the US...let's just have fun and enjoy the prosperity!



America's influence around the world--while not total by any means, but substantial nonetheless--was both tested and extended during this period. The Vietnam War was a none-too-pretty backdrop to what was happening. On the one hand, Carson felt that most of what unfolded would not have done so had the Vietnam War not been the nexus around which both conservatives and some liberals would rally. Apart from a slightly different take on the war in Korea slightly over a decade earlier, there had never been a war in this country as unpopular as this one. Most everyone had an opinion. Notably, many of our country's leaders would favor the war initially, but retreat en masse as the war progressed. With few exceptions, most today do not blame those who protested the war nor those who actually left the country rather than fight in this gut-wrenching, family-shredding, conscience-rending "conflict" (unless they are running for public office, where there are no shortage of hypocrites who use military service as a litmus test for the holding of office, regardless of the circumstances.)

The reaction to this ill-advised foreign adventure was only part and parcel of what was actually happening half a world away. Call it the catalyst. As has been explained, while this was certainly a clearly justified reaction to events that were unfolding halfway around the

world, it was also a reaction to that staid, conformist generation. That mindset, the mindset of Carson's parents' generation, a result of WWII and the outgrowth that presented itself as a result of that formative experience, was simply not his.

For one thing, Carson's generation did not experience anything like the Great Depression or WWII. In fact, as a subsequent result of the division of the world into at least two distinct blocs following WWII--East and West--there was a race going on...a race for world supremacy. The Soviet bloc (East) was telling the world that the decadent West would confer upon them the means to destroy capitalism. The race to create the perfect society was well on its way after WWII. The wake-up call was the launch of the Soviet rocket "Sputnik" in the late 1950s. From that point on, things would not be the same. Carson's generation would distance itself from that of his parents and all that preceded it. His would be the first generation that grew up with constant change, as the race for superiority was on. Technology would change at a breakneck pace. That notion cannot be overstated. Because of that, his parents' generation would have a very difficult time understanding their children.

There was this assumption, by Carson's generation, that they were entitled to certain things, most assuredly "the pursuit of happiness." We now know that his parents' generation did not have a lock on morality nor did they necessarily know what was best. The fact that authority, for the most part, remained unquestioned was one of the main reasons that the United States became engaged and then embroiled in the Vietnam War. By the same token, Carson's generation did not have all the answers either. While it was certainly to their credit that they questioned authority and took action against a war that was by virtually any measure unjust, they were a naïve generation that assumed the best in humanity as a basis from which to begin. "Give peace a chance," as John Lennon intoned, is, while laudable, a very naïve notion in this world in which we live. There are too many individuals who have little sense of fair play and equity for their fellow man, who want to pursue their goals at the expense of others. It is doubtful, particularly as the world becomes more complicated, that there will be enough opportunity for all to enjoy the fruits that this world offers; thus conflict and greed are likely to remain constant companions.

If they didn't have all of the answers, Carson reasoned, they certainly had many more questions. One of the forms in which these questions manifested itself was music. Rock-and-roll music was cresting in the '60s with the onset of the British invasion. For the first few years, the contemporaries and devotees of Elvis Presley were making a name for themselves. Artists like Buddy Holly and the Crickets, The Platters, Dion and the Belmonts, The Four

Seasons, Fats Domino, Ray Charles, and others held sway in the hearts of young boys and girls throughout the United States. The rather simplistic messages put forth by the groups in the early part of the '60s, prior to the build up of the Vietnam War, gave way to lyrics and demonstrations that became increasingly more piercing and demanding. Music gradually began to define who they were and what they were becoming.

“Look at this picture, Carson,” begged Van, another of Carson’s high school friends showing Carson a picture of The Beatles in 1963. “Look at the length of their hair. It’s touching their ears. Can you believe it? I wonder how they can get away with it? It’s long, like Elvis Presley’s, but different in style.”

“Wow! Is that really how the British are wearing their hair?” asked Carson.

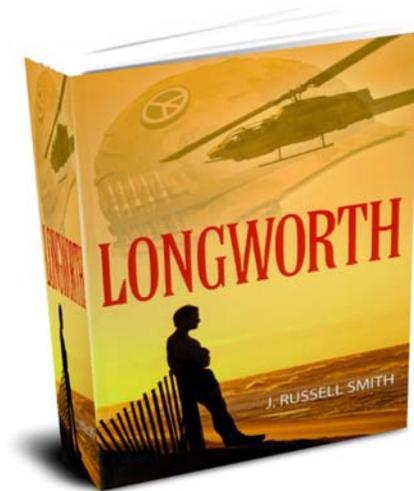
Carson’s generation wore their hair fairly short, but I suspect that was as much the influence of Middle America as anything else. There were exceptions, though, like the surfers in California. They were beginning to wear their hair longer, although this style did not exist entirely in a vacuum. At any rate, this was clearly something special, more so even than the invasion of Elvis Presley and his censored pelvic motions. This was big time, even if Carson and his friends didn’t truly appreciate the impact. In fact, it would be a number of years before everything truly sunk in. The rise of the Beatles and the emergence of the Vietnam War were concurrent. They, along with the world music scene, would be inextricably linked.

If one pays much attention to the lyrics of a song, and most purport to do so, then music can have a grave effect on one’s life. It is one thing to simply listen to the beat, enjoy the tune, “dance to the music,” so to speak--and quite another to become immersed in the message. It was Carson’s opinion that the words/lyrics, while not entirely meaningless, were relatively unimportant as a social message, that the singer was simply another instrument. Perhaps one could have some fun with the lyrics, but as a reason for listening to the music or buying the record, lyrics are, in Carson’s opinion, a poor excuse. The whole notion behind the rap/hip-hop music that would come to the fore in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is the message. It certainly isn’t the music, if one can call it that. Carson suggested that if one wanted to glean the message, why not read a book or an article rather than wrap it in a song? While there is certainly nothing wrong with having meaningful lyrics, Carson reasoned, it should not be the reason to “dig” the record. Nevertheless, there are many, many people who would disagree with Carson and, hence, hang on the words that emanate from a rock star or group. Because of this, music became vital and defining during the course of the '60s and

remains so today. Music in the '60s became the banner for a generation. Never in the history of modern man has music influenced a generation like it did Carson's. Ironically, while the actual music was non-pareil, the message to this generation, in contradistinction to Carson's mindset, seems to have been reflected in the lyrics.

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTER

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