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The Reactor

A Graduation Message

No one has asked me to be a commencement speaker lately, but just in case, I've been jotting down some thoughts. Perhaps, just perhaps, similar thoughts would have helped me as I was on my way out of high school.

Most young people have goals. Some are thought through clearly, some are kind of muddled. "To get out from under parental control" is one such goal. A job, a paycheck, is another. It's obvious that a lot of teen-agers really don't see much point to an education. It shows in their attitude in the classroom, lack of respect for teachers, that sort of thing.

I've talked to teen-agers who don't see much point to anything that doesn't generate a paycheck NOW. If you can make \$10 an hour unloading freight, why study?

If you're a teen-ager in that situation, maybe you ought to take a couple of hours and go sit on the beach. Don't take a sixpack. Don't take a boyfriend or girlfriend to distract you.

Just sit there and think: What do I want to be when I'm 50? And how can I get there?

When you've decided, go find 10 people who are 50 now, (give or take five years), and who are successfully doing what you want to be doing at their age.

Interview them. Take notes. Ask questions. What kind of an education did they need? Did they do it the hard way? Is there a better way to get where they have gotten?

If your goal is to be a boxboy in a grocery store when you reach 50, go find 10 50-year old boxboys. What did they need to get to that goal? You can make the same kind of survey of lawyers, businessmen, doctors, newspaper publishers or auto mechanics.

No reason to be shy about it, either. Most people know more about their won jobs than they do about anything else. The car mechanic of 50 is an expert on what it is to be a mechanic.

The social scientist calls all those of like age a "cohort". My cohorts are those born in 1931. There are roughly 400 of us in Pacifica.

There are about 700 people in Pacifica who were born in 1966. They are now 17 or 18, a cohort that will go through life together.

The decisions I and my cohorts made in 1948 have made a lot of difference in our lives. Some of us decided to drink and drive, and are dead as a result. Some of us smoked, and died of cancer or heart disease, or will soon. Some of us were in the wrong place at the wrong time, such as Korea in 1951.

The cohort of 1966 will have some decisions made for them, just as my cohort did. A war or a depression in the next 20 years will have a major effect on what the cohort of 1966 is doing at 50, or if they reach 50.

But their own decisions will also make a difference. Drinking, smoking or drugs, or... The decision to go for immediate income (unloading freight) rather than future success (higher education) will make a substantial difference. If you are 17, go ask those who made their own decisions before you. How did their decisions pan out? What would they do differently? It's worth thinking about.