

VILLAGE VIEW

ANDREA LEONARD

A new-comer to the Cape, talking with a Cape Codder of many year's standing, commented he sees few signs, here, of the recession this nation is experiencing. "It always takes a while for economic changes to affect the Cape," the native said, "but this winter, people will really feel the pinch. Several stores have already gone under. More are closing. Business this past summer was slower than usual. Soon there will be long lines at the unemployment office."

"Why does it take longer here?" the new-comer, a younger man, asked.

"I don't know. But it's true of every past recession, and this one won't be any different. This one might be worse than some we've seen. Business failures are widespread now, and those with big payrolls are laying off their help instead of transferring them to other outlets."

Mr. Newcomer looked worried. "That could be a problem for me. I'm in middle-management, but would have a hard time finding another job on the Cape. What would you suggest I do if I get laid off?"

The old-timer said, "I suppose you've got a wife and kids. I suppose you've got a whale of a mortgage and, like us all, your bills come rolling in every month..."

The young man nodded wryly. "Three kids. A girl and two boys. All in elementary school. My wife never worked. She and I both feel she should be home when the kids come in from school. Besides, she has no special skills; if a lot of people are unemployed, what chance would she have, getting a job?"

"Slim" the older man scratched his ear.

"What would you do? In my shoes, I mean."

"Perhaps," said the Cape Codder, "I'd think of getting into a different line, right now. Something with a better future. I'd look at what's happening and figure what will be most in demand ten years from now. You're young; you'll be working for another thirty years, maybe more. Does your job offer future opportunity?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean. How can I tell what may crop up ten or twenty years from now? It's today and tomorrow I'm worrying about."

"Well, sure you are. But something I read recently leads me to think changes are in the offing. Computers are going to run things, 'most everything, soon. Industries aren't going to be using people to produce consumer goods as in the past. Robots and computers are already putting people out of work. But someone has to design and build computers, maintain and repair 'em, sell and demonstrate them. If it were me, I'd be looking for a job in that field."

"Maybe you could, but I haven't the background. I'm not an engineer. What computer company would hire me?"

"I'm not an engineer, either. But even if I had to start as a janitor or stock-room clerk, that's what I'd do. And then work up. Companies are looking for ambitious people with latent ability. They train their own employees and help them advance. According to this article, American industry spends over 35 billion a year to train employees."

"Are there any computer companies on Cape Cod?"

"I don't know; however, if it meant moving, I'd move. If it meant leaving my wife and kids here during the week and coming home weekends, for a while, I'd do that."

"My wife would have a collapse!"

"Bet she wouldn't. I'm not saying she'd like it, but women are stronger than we give them credit for, in most cases."

"You don't know my wife..."

"Nope. No, I don't. But I know that through the years, century after century, thousands of women -- millions of 'em, maybe -- managed while their husbands had to leave them to

struggle on their own. And they did a good job, too. Not because they wanted it that way, but because there was no choice."

"What are you telling me? You talk as though 'single-parent families' were as common in the past as they are today. I thought 'single-parenting' is a new social situation, not one that's recurred for generations."

"You think about it. The Crusaders went to the Holy Land, a thousand years ago, leaving their women to raise the kids. Immigrating European men came to America to 'make their fortunes,' then sent for their families when they'd saved enough money for their passage."

"A hundred-and-fifty years ago, whaling men went on sea voyages lasting four, sometimes five years. In most cases, wives stayed behind with the children. Why, even as recently as WWII and the one in Viet Nam, American husbands and fathers in the armed services were gone three or four years. Single-parenting isn't easy, but neither is it something new in our civilization."

"I never thought of it that way. I know these things, too, of course, but never considered how wars or economic pressures affect family life. You think, then, I should find work with a brighter economic future, and even though it might take me away from home, I should go?"

"Not necessarily, but if it were me, I'd give it serious consideration. Especially today. Those who become established early, in a field where growth is bound to come, will do better in the long run than somebody who sticks to a shrinking field. There aren't a lot of buggy-whip companies doing business today."

The younger man grinned. "No, there sure aren't. You've given me something positive to think about and an entirely different view. I feel better, just having talked to you."

"Nice of you to say so. If what I say makes sense, I'm glad I took you seriously. Keep one thing in mind, though; any decision should be a mutual one between you and your wife. And another thing -- once you make up your mind, go ahead with it."

"You mean, right away?"

"Yup. If you wait you'll run into dozens of reasons not to do it. Then one day there'll be a pink slip in your pay envelope and you'll be just another guy in the unemployment line. That takes the starch out of a man in a hurry. It's easier to get a job when you're already employed than when you've got all day to look. That is discouraging because you realize someone at the head of the line filling out applications is probably better qualified than you."

"Begin before the rush is on, before everyone and his brother is trying to get the same job you want."

The younger man extended his hand; the older one took it. "Thanks. I really mean it."

"Don't mention it," said the Cape Codder.