

There can be only one maxim

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Burlington, Vermont

March 7, 2023

Distilling a decade: If we could keep one piece of wisdom from the 1980s, what would it be?

“Let me explain . . .

. . . no, there is too much.

Let me sum up.”

The eighties started with the Rubik’s cube pandemic and ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall. I think the causal link there is clear.

Some other stuff happened.

Like every age, the eighties was filled with real stories which would become history, inevitably blended with fictional stories.

The eighties, the last quiet decade, the one before the internet exploded with the webbing, gave us so much, the third decade of fashion gone wild.

If you weren't there yourself in the eighties, either because you didn't exist yet, or you were Keith Richards, you can take *Stranger Things* as a reasonable guide.

Stephen King—area man, regional author—told us how the world might be working, that it might be filled with ... stranger things.

If we paid attention in the right way.

He taught us that monsters are everywhere in the everyday.

Cars.

Dogs.

Beloved pets who have passed on.

Clowns (we really should have known, that feels like that's on us).

Super fans.

And that when you give a speech at a prom, and you feel like maybe it's undeserved, you should make sure there are no buckets of farm animal blood directly above you.

So, the eighties:

General ambient menace complicated by an inability to communicate over distances of more than a few hundred yards.

Because something Stephen King dreamt up just cut the landline. Again.

And the batteries in the walkie-talkies are running out.

But as time goes on, the history of an era becomes thinner, more focused, sometimes distorted and misrepresented, sometimes simply wrong, often misused for power in the present.

Some of the eighties we have had to rethink considerably (Breakfast Club). Or simply forget entirely. And we largely can. The non-virality of photos on walls, in albums, and in drawers. Most will be gone, never spread. The gift of a pre-social media world.

So: What did we learn? And maybe we learned again, anew.

What eternal wisdom did the eighties deliver?

What turns of phrase, what maxims to live by?

If we want real wisdom, we have go to the one true source:

Movies.

Eighties movies.

There were some misleads.

“Greed is Good.”

(Wall Street, 1987.)

Really: “Greed, for lack of a better word, is good.”

The eighties, like all eras, attempted to give us family advice:

“Phone home”

(E.T. the Extra Terrestrial (which is short for Extra Terrestrial the Extra Terrestrial), 1982).

Clearly Spielberg was telling us to call our parents.

Unless they’re monsters.

Stephen King did warn you.

The eighties told us to just do the work.

“Wax on, wax off.”

(Karate Kid, 1984.)

The 80s of course had 1984, much anticipated. Something of a let down. 1984 did have Karate Kid.

The eighties gave us new monsters:

“Rodents of Unusual Size”

(Princess Bride, 1987.)

The eighties gave us alternate ways to comically threaten or unsettle people:

“Say hello to my little friend”

(Scarface, 1983.)

And:

“Come with me if you want to live.”

(Terminator, 1984.)

The eighties had new ways to talk about thrills:

“I feel the need, the need for speed”

(Top Gun, 1986.)

The eighties suggested we accept that life is hard:

“Get used to disappointment.”

(Princess Bride, 1987.)

The eighties gave us new ways of to express enthusiasm.

And because it's a family show, readable verbal grawlixing:

**“Yippie-ki-yay mother-asterisk-exclamation
point-percentage-sign-ampersand-er”**

and

“Yippie-ki-yay motherforker”

(John McClean, Diehard, 1988, with The Good Place’s
bowdlerization.)

Force-bearing felt beings were against half measures.

“Do or do not, there is no try.”

(From the most sagacious of muppets, Yoda, The Empire
Strikes Back, 1980, the one true Star Wars film.)

But if there was one line to make it out of the eighties, that we
might want to preserve for generations to come . . .

Starting with ROUS’s (Rodents of Unusual Size) I’ve given you
seven phrases from the eighties.

I have an eighth one, which if it had a color, would be octarine.

Notice a connection between these phrases?

Or hear one?

The syllable counters out there, those with a particular kind of
Rain Man (1988) aural-linguistic ability, will have registered
that all these phrases (and the title as well (Highlander, 1986))
are eight syllables long.

Except for “Get used to disappointment” which only has seven.

But you know.

Disappointment.

Removing all the bad,
dialing down the fluoro,
sifting for the good,
the eighties gave us
one eternal
eight syllable guide to existence,
an eighth phrase:

“Be excellent to each other.”

Bill and Ted (1989).