

A QUIET REVOLUTIONBy Rick Newcombe

There is a brilliant pipe maker in Japan named Kei Gotoh. Along with the legendary Tokutomi and several others, Kei Gotoh is considered one of the best pipe sculptors of all time. And I particularly like him because he paid me the most peculiar compliment when we first met.

It was at the Chicago Pipe Show a few years ago, and he was with other Japanese pipe makers, several of whom were dressed in traditional black kimonos with Tabi socks and woven slippers, their long hair tied in a bun. After we were introduced, Kei Gotoh bowed and said, "Ah, Mr. Newcombe, it is such an honor to meet you. I love your book. It is on my nightstand, and you put me to sleep every night!"

Well, I hope I won't put you to sleep tonight with my reflections on pipe smoking past, present and future.

I want to explore the issue of why any of us would still smoke a pipe in the 21st century when it is viewed as such an unusual thing to do, to say the least. There are even some people who regard it as dangerous and irresponsible, and if they had their way, it would be classified as a criminal activity. At best, society views pipe smoking in 2008 as a hopelessly eccentric and out-of-date pastime completely at odds with modern manners, opinion and decorum.

It wasn't always this way. In fact, pipe smoking has been popular for many centuries. In the United States, our country has its roots in tobacco. George Washington was a tobacco farmer and John Adams a pipe smoker. During the American Civil War of the 1860s, soldiers on both sides were frequently photographed with pipes in their mouths. Our earliest images of Santa Claus showed a jolly man with a clay pipe. During the roaring twenties most college men, and their professors, were pipe smokers. Then came the Great Depression of the 1930s, when the pipe was the poor man's way to smoke because you only need one or two inexpensive pipes to smoke, and pipe tobacco lasts a long time. Following World War II, the pipe was pictured with television and movie fathers in one show after another, including with Robert Young in *Father Knows Best* and with Spencer Tracy in the original movie version of *Father of the Bride*. It is not surprising that *The Washington Post* once called pipe smoke "the aroma of fatherhood."

Norman Rockwell, a lifetime pipe smoker, was arguably the most popular American artist and illustrator of the 20th century, and his 322 cover paintings for *The Saturday Evening Post* have become legendary. One of his most famous paintings is his triple self-portrait, in which he is studying his face in a mirror and showing us the canvas on which he is painting, while we see the whole picture as if we were standing behind the artist. In the portrait on the canvas, Rockwell took off his glasses and smoothed out a few wrinkles on his face, but he kept his pipe firmly in his mouth. In his idealized vision of himself, where he shows us the face he wants the world to see, he is clearly a proud pipe smoker.

By the time I started smoking a pipe, in 1976, the president of the United States, Gerald Ford, was rarely pictured without his pipe. The fact that he lived to be 93, longer than any other president in history, says a great deal about the relaxing benefits of moderate pipe smoking.

But throughout the 1980s, '90s and to today, the message has been that all smoking is bad. The commercials started by saying it is unhealthy and ended by portraying it as pure evil. The rationale for this propaganda blitz was the very real damage caused by heavy cigarette smoking, but moderate cigar and pipe smoking were bundled with cigarettes as if they were all the same.

The result is that all things tobacco have been condemned. Smokers have been ostracized. They have been demonized. They are today's lepers. It is difficult in most places to smoke at work, or in a restaurant, or even in a bar. Smoking on an airplane ... are you crazy? There are laws banning smoking in cars in certain situations.

As someone who travels frequently, I have to make special efforts to find a smoking room in a hotel. Spending a day at the ballpark means spending a day without my pipe. A growing number of cities are banning smoking outside in so-called "public areas." We have seen judges award custody of children to the non-smoking parent only because they don't smoke.

I bought my first pack of cigarettes when I was 12, no questions asked. At age 57, I was "carded" by a teenager at Walgreens when I bought some pipe tobacco. Of course, it is insane to allow a 12-year-old boy to buy tobacco products without even asking for proof of identification, showing that he is at least 18 years old. The only thing more insane is to ask a man three years shy of his 60th birthday for proof of identification showing that he is at least 18 years old.

Our new prohibition is masked in many different forms, but the key is to declare property rights obsolete and to mock anyone who disagrees as being old-fashioned. Just change the meaning of words.

In the best tradition of Orwell's "1984," private buildings have been reclassified as "public" buildings if they are open to the public. For hundreds of years, the difference between a private building and a public building was a matter of who owned it -- not who visited it.

Historically, the public building was City Hall, the DMV or the local police station, while the private building was the town's bank, commercial office building or popular restaurant.

But today, by modern definitions, there is no such thing as a private building. They are all public buildings, and if you cherish property rights, you should be very worried. By changing this definition, the prohibitionists are able to trample over the property rights of individuals as a way to ban smoking.

Not long ago, *The New York Times* ran an editorial advocating a ban on all indoor smoking -- yes, no exceptions, *all* indoor smoking -- while several California cities have passed laws banning most outdoor smoking.

These are similar to fascist proposals and prohibitions. No, let me rephrase that: These *are* fascist proposals and prohibitions. They fit nicely with our new sense of conformity as a society, where we increasingly live and work on top of one another and forfeit our privacy and individuality. Nearly all airports have intolerably long security lines, and invasive body searches are not unusual. As we submit physically to all this inhuman herding, it is only natural to succumb psychologically to the herd mentality. Our cities are crammed with identical-looking office buildings with hermetically sealed windows and crowded elevators. Even the suburbs have become congested.

Supermarkets smell like office buildings, which smell like hospitals, which smell like airports. Chrome and disinfectant are the order of the day. There is little tolerance for the old-fashioned aromas of cigar and pipe tobaccos, and little patience for the slow, time-honored traditions of carefully packing a pipe, puffing and tamping, fiddling and relighting, and all those other activities associated with relaxed pipe smoking.

We live in a world that glorifies all things new, fast-paced, sanitized and sterilized ... in a society that claims to value diversity and tolerance, but when it comes to tobacco, forget about it.

Despite the barrage of propaganda, there are a handful of us who persist, who continue to enjoy our pipes, who have discovered the exciting world of pipe collecting. More and more young people are becoming interested in the hobby, and a surprising number of them are becoming very good pipe makers who are attracted to the infinite possibilities for creating artwork that is functional.

I attended the World Pipe Smoking Contest in St. Petersburg last October. It was my first time in Russia, and St. Petersburg is a magnificent city. But what struck me most was the large number of pipe enthusiasts in their 20s and 30s. They were from Russia, Italy, Spain, Sweden, the Ukraine and dozens of other countries.

You find the same at the Chicago Pipe Show each May, where the universal language among more than a thousand participants is pipes -- pipe collecting, pipe making, pipe trading and pipe smoking. Even if the intolerant ones were to ban smoking during the show, we still would find a way to enjoy our pipes together.

So the question is: What is the allure of pipe collecting and pipe smoking when we are assaulted daily with the message that unless we quit smoking, we are not wanted? We can go to dinner parties and to weddings and picnics and to all kinds of social events, just as long as we don't smoke.

There might be many reasons why you picked up a pipe in the first place -- maybe your father or grandfather smoked a pipe, or maybe you've always liked the image of the pipe smoker for a variety of reasons -- it doesn't really matter.

What is important to understand is that all of you here tonight, and everyone who smokes a pipe in 2008, is a rebel. You are not a sheep that goes along with the flock, you are an individualist who refuses to be bullied by the mob.

Pipe smoking today is considered such an extremely anti-social activity that we have become social outlaws, and we're willing to live with that.

Would we also be willing to become political outlaws? If pipe smoking were banned by government decree, would we continue to smoke our pipes? I know I would, and I suspect most of you would, too.

Yes, we are all quiet revolutionaries.

Our goal, however, is not to topple governments. It is to be left alone by those governments so we can enjoy our pipes together in peace. This is not a minor matter for most of us. In fact, the freedom to enjoy our pipes is a condition for our happiness. As Mark Twain once said, "If I cannot smoke in heaven, then I shall not go."

But it is not enough to be a pipe smoker merely to be defiant. We are pipe smokers, and pipe collectors, because we have discovered a world of fulfillment that is unknown to more than 99 percent of the world's population.

We have discovered the Zen-like relaxation and meditation that pipe smoking brings.

We have discovered the tactile pleasures involved with holding a pipe, along with the wonderful soothing of all our senses, which pipe smoking gently provides.

Many people have called pipes sensual -- and for good reason.

We have discovered the intense excitement that we feel when buying a new pipe that we really want -- a feeling like no other.

At some point, we have come to realize that our pipe collections are invaluable to us, much more so than any jewelry collection.

I mention jewelry because of an incident that occurred last summer, when I was at a small dinner party in Sacramento hosted by California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. I was seated next to Gail Gardner, whose husband, Bob, is a famous Los Angeles photographer and one of Arnold's longtime photographers. I have known Bob and Gail for many years, and I casually mentioned to Gail that I was interested in hiring Bob to take pictures of some of my pipes. Gail looked surprised after she realized I was referring to smoking pipes.

"You don't still smoke a pipe, do you?" she asked.

"I do," I replied. "I try to enjoy two bowls a day, and if it's a good day, three bowls."

A few weeks later we were all three in Bob's photo studio, where I spread out dozens of pipes. Bob is the ultimate perfectionist, and it took three hours and twenty minutes (I was looking at the clock every five minutes!) before he took his first photo. He kept changing the lighting, the background, the position of the pipes -- you name it -- until he felt it was just right.

His patience paid off. Ulf Noltensmeier, an Old World craftsman who makes the S. Bang pipes along with Per Hansen, said Bob captured the "soul" of the pipes. Before Ulf saw them, however, Gail had spent countless hours in Photoshop trying to make each pipe look as crisp, sharp and shiny as possible. The more she studied the individual pipes in the photographs, the more she appreciated them as the works of art they are.

"They are like little jewels," she said. "I had no idea pipes could be so beautiful."

That is an important reason that I think we are pipe collectors -- because we appreciate the beauty of our pipes. It makes no difference if they are hand made or factory made. What counts is what we perceive to be their aesthetic beauty and rarity. But these characteristics are only on the outside. It is the inside that counts most, where a well-lit pipe with our favorite tobacco kept barely smoldering with occasional puffs -- that is heaven for us.

For me, most of my smoking is a solitary activity, which is especially good for relaxation and meditation. I usually smoke two bowls in the evening, when I read, write, or watch a mystery on TV that I have TiVoed. My favorite shows include *Columbo*, *Perry Mason*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Maigret*, *Miss Marple*, *Poirot* and, most recently, *Monk*.

My mind is only half-watching as I drift into a state of total calm. I have one of those blood pressure monitors that I bought from the drug store, and at some point I try to remember to take my blood pressure. Once my pipe is barely smoldering, I take my blood pressure, and invariably it drops to the exact extent to which the pipe is helping me relax.

After a long day without smoking -- a day filled with work, working out, interacting with many people at the office, and family dinner -- then there is my time ... an aged tobacco that is mellow like an aged wine, a pipe made by a friend or someone I know about and admire, or by a factory that built its reputation on a commitment to excellence.

Each pipe I smoke has its own story, and these stories represent a part of my life, a part of who I am. I always remember when I acquired a pipe, and that memory takes me back to a different time and place. It is a part of my past, enjoyed in the present, and available for the future -- for many years to come.

Nothing helps me relax like smoking a pipe. Not Yoga, or petting the dog or cat, or alcohol, or hypnosis. I've tried them all, and nothing compares to relaxing with a pipe. The fact that some men over the centuries have known this only reinforces my conviction that I am on the right track.

But pipe smoking is not always a solitary activity. There are still a few terrific pipe stores in business, and I try to visit many whenever I travel to new cities. When I am at home, on Saturdays I frequently stop by the original Tinder Box in Santa Monica for a pipe, a cup of coffee, and good conversation with fellow pipe smokers. We usually swap tobaccos as well as stories, and we always have fun.

It is the social aspects of pipe smoking that have made pipe shows so popular around the world. In the old days, there was no need for a pipe show because you could smoke your pipe pretty much anywhere you wanted. But as we have become ostracized and isolated, there is a need for us to get together with our pipes and tobaccos, whether it is a banquet dinner in Seattle or a pipe show in Chicago, New York or even St. Petersburg, Russia.

Pipe shows are just so much fun. They open up a world unlike any that exists today. It is a world of friendship and camaraderie, of buying and selling, of trading and swapping, of meeting and mingling with pipe experts who span the globe -- and we're all experts when it comes to our own pipe collections. It is a world of smoking without the slightest bit of self-consciousness, at least for a few hours, a world where people might have almost nothing in common except for their shared passion for pipes and tobaccos. And that passion is a common bond that breaks down language barriers and overrides all else.

Another development that keeps us enthusiastic is the Internet. We can look at hundreds if not thousands of new and used pipes for sale from all over the world. We can log on to one of the forums and make new friends with this common interest.

And what about the variety of choices within this field? Whether it is the type of pipes or what makes a good smoker, there are as many opinions as there are pipe smokers.

It does not matter what your specific interests are. What counts is to know that for you, when it comes to your pipes, you are king. You are always right, and that applies even if you change your mind!

I remember once at a Los Angeles Pipe Show when Vernon Vig received an award for "Outstanding Contribution to the Hobby." Vernon was selected because of his work uniting pipe clubs in the United States with pipe clubs from around the world. But Vernon would have none of it. He said his real contribution to the hobby was in buying and selling as an ordinary collector.

"Over the past 50 years," he said, "I've purchased many fine pipes at high prices -- which has been good for pipe makers and pipe shops. Now I'm reselling many of those same pipes at low prices -- which is good for pipe smokers."

I love Vernon's attitude toward pipe collecting -- he does it for fun and for no other reason.

The fact is, there is room for people of all income brackets when it comes to pipe collecting. A seven dollar CustomBilt pipe from 10 years ago might sell for \$20 today and several hundred dollars in 40 years -- because CustomBilt stopped making pipes years ago and the ones still available will become increasingly rare.

This is even truer for high-grade Dunhills, Charatans and other English pipes, and it applies to the beautiful pipes from Denmark, Italy, America, Japan, Germany, Ireland and many other countries. Once the pipe maker dies, those pipes are increasingly scarce. If there is a demand, the price will rise. A \$40 Sixten Ivarsson pipe sold in 1964 at the old Pipe Dan store in Copenhagen could easily fetch \$2,000 on eBay today.

My own prediction for the future is that pipe collecting will be even more popular and specialized with an emphasis on hand-made pipes and rare factory pipes. Good grain, beautiful shapes, good smoking qualities and the difficulty in obtaining the pipe will determine its value, and I expect the prices to continue rising. But who knows?

In 40 years, that \$2,000 Sixten Ivarsson pipe might sell for \$20,000 ... or it might sell for \$20. We have no way of knowing for sure. If the prices go up, that will be good for my heirs -- they'll get rich! If prices go down, that is good for me -- I'll be able to buy more pipes and add freely to my collection.

I don't buy pipes in order to make money. In fact, my wife says I make money in order to buy pipes.

Relaxing with a pipe is a lost art today, yet something this much fun, with such a storied past and so many rewards, won't stay lost forever.

All of us in this room have discovered the unlimited number of pleasures derived from pipe smoking and pipe collecting, and we are the lucky ones. It is as if we have uncovered a secret treasure that is centuries old.

The first pipe club in the world was founded in Germany in 1876, and it still exists today. A group of pipe enthusiasts in the city of Wurselen decided to get together for occasional parties and conversations about their favorite pipes and tobaccos. There was only one time period when the club was banned -- the 12 years from 1933-1945 when Adolf Hitler and the Nazis were in charge. That's an interesting fact to keep in mind if you feel intimidated by today's self-righteous and militant anti-smoking movement. There is nothing like a little historical perspective.

At the St. Petersburg show, I was surprised to learn that Peter the Great was an enthusiastic pipe smoker 300 years ago. This is the man who brought European culture to Russia.

That culture included the music of German composer Johann Sebastian Bach, who famously compared his lifespan to that of his pipe in a poem he wrote for his wife. Bach turned to his pipe for relaxation, contemplation and what he called "fruitful meditation." He ended the poem with these words:

And so, puffing contentedly,
On land, at sea, at home, abroad,
I smoke my pipe and worship God.

As I looked around the luxurious ballroom at the Gala Dinner of the St. Petersburg Pipe Show, I thought about the fact that great men throughout history have turned to their pipes for comfort and solace. My mood that night was enthusiastically upbeat because of the excitement of the crowd, with good music and entertainment, good food, good wine, good friends, good dancing and good pipes!

I was watching so many pipe enthusiasts from all over the world, young and old, who were having such a great time, and I savored the moment. I was looking at a room full of independent thinking people who refuse to be bent into submission by the tyranny of the majority. It occurred to me that something this special, this much fun, that has such a rich history as well as a strong contemporary appeal to so many individualists worldwide, must continue to prosper.

Most people are under a great deal of stress these days, and many of them aren't having a whole lot of fun in their lives, which is why I believe it is only a matter of time before more and more people discover the fun that we're having as pipe collectors and the relaxing, stress-reducing benefits of moderate pipe smoking. We are indeed leading a quiet revolution.

#####

January 26, 2008