

Life, Death, and Spark-Tending

Written by Alex Baer

Thursday, 06 August 2015 15:58

My new coffee mug's art on the side is a thing of retro-futuristic beauty -- part steampunk, part Bradbury, maybe. There is an art deco scene of a mad scientist's lab, including a robot and assorted glowing objects and tools and scattered projects -- shelves filled with curious and intriguing things.

Above that widescreen-band of art, above: "Certifiable Mad Genius." Below the art, in a smaller font: "I have a death ray, and I know how to use it."

- (There is nothing to define just what "MAD" may be - it could mean *angry*. It might mean *mentally disturbed*
- . It could be the acronym for *Mutual Assured Destruction*
- . It could mean all three.)

The mug is good as a standalone item. The mug also makes me think of a cartoon I have pinned on a battered cork board. It's an old, yellowing, dog-eared clipping, from a New Yorker magazine, as I remember, a cartoon by Charles Addams -- yes, *that* Charles Addams. The setting is in an office building, in a patent attorney's office, in perhaps the 1890s. Out the window, we see other buildings -- enough to realize the office is on the third floor, say.

Two men are in the office, both dressed in old-fashioned suits. The inventor of an Buck-Rogers-looking item is present, hat in hand. The patent attorney has the item in both hands. It is plugged into an electrical outlet. The attorney has the object out an open window, pointed down to street level. The attorney is saying, in the caption, "Death ray, fiddlesticks! Why, it doesn't even slow them up!"

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- *If I had a special box in my hand, or a device in my possession, one capable of making certain categories of people disappear -- vanish without a trace, to somewhere unknown, somehow, in some way, leaving behind no trace of them, or their possessions, or of them ever having existed, maybe -- would I use it? □ If so, what category of people would I specify? □ How would I feel about having such power? □ What would having, or using, such a power say about*

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me?

This is a conversation starter, an opening gambit for friends to use as a springboard into discussions of philosophy, religion, morality, the corruption power brings, and so on.

It covers hundreds of short stories, novels, teevee programs and movies, in one form or another. Before you condemn me for posing such a question, I would ask you to please understand the reason for my asking:

We humans talk a good game about the sanctity of human life. Such lip service speaks of our higher ideals. The higher ideals are almost never put into practice, except by those whose goal it is -- whose *job* it is -- to touch someone directly, and, through their actions, to actually save a life, reduce some suffering, help bring food or water to an individual in need.

We speak of the special nature of human life, self-awareness, the rareness of our existence on this planet. Then, we instantly cheapen it by doing what we do best: killing each other.

Oh, sure, we could have put everyone in the country through college, for free, based on just one year's expenditure for war in Afghanistan, at its peak. But war was more important.

We could have given all homeowners -- *homebuyers*, really -- a gift of their mortgages via direct purchase, but we decided to use that money instead, to bail out the banks and loan companies and insurance companies who triggered the mortgage meltdown in the first place.

Some pour endless energy and millions of dollars into trying to stop abortions, on the one hand, while, on the other hand, they do all they can to shred every support system and service normally used to help those same children, after they are born.

- You know the ones. Makes me wonder why they don't take a hint from the book they always quote, and demonstrate how their religious leader might have acted, and instead put those same funds into making sure those children not only survive, but actually thrive after they

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are born.

We **say** nothing is more valuable than a human life, and our actions **demonstrate** that a human life is the cheapest thing there is. We say it in our policies all the time, and to ourselves, and to other individuals, to other countries.

It's important to find stable energy sources, we say. Then, we ignore the science and evidence that shows us we are killing all life on this planet, via fossil fuel use. But, we keep using the fossil fuels we know -- *know* -- are slowly smothering all life on this one rare world. There is never any outcry about this from the people with that same book, the book saying we humans are charged to be good stewards of this Earth.

And so forth.

* * * * *

- We humans, by the way, once had a device that would actually kill off any category of humans we wanted. We still have them, plenty of them, far too many of them, when even one of them is too many for humans to have and hold. We used the devices twice in war, with the category switch set to *Japanese*, flattening Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That radioactive gift keeps on giving to this day.

The atomic bombs were an outgrowth of our respect to American lives, and to giving up as few American lives as possible, via taking as many kinds of Non-American lives as possible.

- The crash-dive, no-holds-barred Manhattan Project was a war project about Death. We could use a crash-dive, no-holds-barred Manhattan Project about Life, about exploring other ways to create and store energy, preventing a suffocating death of this world, and all on it.

This has been true for some time now. It is certainly true today, at a time when we remember the time when humans had such clever devices, and such little wisdom they were used by one

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group of humans against another group of humans.

We are very good at forgetting our global samenesses, and so easily dismissing our membership in the worldwide tribe of humanity, over and over again, having been made to believe that one tribe is different from another, monstrous, even -- as if the other tribe does not need food, water, air, shelter, clothing, the need to provide for their families, just as we do.

- We would do well to remember our samenesses, and not just after we act out against others, when the messages insisted that one tribe is lesser or greater than another.

We would do well to remember to tend the spark of life with our service and actions, and not simply nodding at it with the action and service of our lips. And with our fears.

- We would do well to remember all these things, and the need for the human race to pivot, quickly, and begin a serious drive to harness and store solar and wave energy.

We once did such remarkable, from-scratch things here, in one nation, to service death. What could all our nations do, with pooled efforts, in the service of life, instead, where all share from combined effort and cooperation? I think about this, looking at that coffee mug.

- I think of a dream of a different sort of device.

What we do, or do not do, right now, today, loudly shouts much about us and what we believe to be really important. It is more telling than the conversational gambit of a death box softly asked.

- It is always a good time to speak of such things, but never so poignantly as now: Our energy needs are high. We are killing ourselves and our planet. It is the anniversary of our using a death box, twice. And, in the same part of the world, 25 of 43 mothballed nuclear reactors in Japan have applied for a restart, following the unending tragedies in Fukushima.

You might remember our extraordinary human precautions were taken there, by experts, and

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how easily those precautions were overwhelmed, and how it was the cascading horror stories were triggered, causing the emergency evacuation of 160,000 human lives.

- These are 160,000 human lives, not just Japanese lives. These lives matter, just as all lives matter. It is a small step. It is no longer World War Two, no longer when at least 129,000 people were killed with just two bombs 70 years ago. It is time for bigger steps, and in more productive and positive directions, away from Death, and toward Life.

Some small steps on refocusing our gaze and attention have been taken, For example, we think so highly of this thing called Life, that we keep going looking around for it elsewhere in the universe, to see if any more of it is around.

- We mostly forget how special this thing called Life is, unless someone close to us loses it, or almost loses it, or if we ourselves happen to come out of any tangles and tangos with the Grim Reaper in passing. We need to find a way to celebrate each day of Life given us, just to keep our heads in the game, as a reminder of what is important to keep in our minds, and in our hearts.

If we never find intelligent, self-aware life someplace else, it will be sad for us. It will mean we really are all alone. But it will also remind us how special Life really is -- and it may then remind us to treat human life far better than we have so far.

However, if we *DO* find intelligent, self-aware life elsewhere, there is good news and bad. We will not be all alone, but it will jump-start the old business we cannot seem to shake here on Earth, not after many millennia:

Us versus Them. □ My Tribe versus Your Tribe. □ Fear. □ Suspicion.

- If we find life out there, we will have some deep soul-searching to do, if only because we will have a lot of explaining to do, to them, and to ourselves, regarding this whole *life-is-im*
portant-but-not-

real

-important

issue in human history -- an issue that we have chained around us, dragging us backward, always slowing us down, dragging us down to the lowest common denominator.

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Maybe it would be good if we started practicing that soul-searching right now, trying to make the actions match the sentiment, and trying to make human life as special as we always say it is.

Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Fukushima: Sometimes, opportunities to be guardians of the spark of life come in strange disguises. But no stranger than a mysterious box with settings and dials. No stranger than a fat bomb with big fins. No stranger than a coffee mug proclaiming advanced energy technology, like a Death Ray.

Now, we just need a Life Ray, to help us fan that special spark we always say is so incredible, so special, and so very important.

Resources & Bonuses:

Full disclosure: Free mug plug for someone I truly do not know, have no connection to, nor have any relationship with:

http://www.zazzle.com/certifiable_mad_genius_mug-168731435756577609

MAD: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mutual_assured_destruction

Hiroshima: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33792789>

Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki

Restart:

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-08-05/japan-heads-toward-nuclear-unknown-with-post-fukushima-restarts>

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