

Snuffed 'n' Stuffed

Written by Alex Baer

Thursday, 11 February 2016 15:41 - Last Updated Friday, 12 February 2016 17:14

After a scan of the majestic shoreline called humanity on some days, it's no wonder some of us swing around and paddle back out to sea, sometimes at great speed, perhaps harboring hunches we were simply all at sea to begin with, or, maybe, that we hadn't put in enough time yet, practicing the Dead Man's Float.

On our deregulated, tea-bagged, and GOP-sandbagged beaches, there are seldom enough lifeguards handy, especially when you really need one -- like when your muscles tense up, you feel the undertow pulling you down, and panic sets in, just from a fleeting second's accidental consideration of "Trump" and "launch codes" in the same thought.

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(A Dead Man's Float, by the way, might be two scoops of jalapeno ice cream in a blend of chili pepper vodka, hot sauce, Pepto Bismol [the original neon pink stuff], Tabasco sauce, and garnished with a Carolina Reaper -- the world's hottest pepper, so says Guinness.

They are expensive, these things, at \$45,000 per throw, but it helps to remember that the cost of a funeral is included in the successful completion of legal paperwork required by anybody ordering one.)

*

Yes, well, we're all adrift anymore in the tossing, roiling ocean of souls - unanimously, anonymously. This has probably been the case from from the Industrial Revolution on up to today, when all our Generalist skills for living were given the heave-ho, and we all had to become masters of much smaller pieces of the Life Puzzle, and to much greater depths.

It is the way of Progress, apparently, to transform human populations from self-reliant, survivalist know-everythings to interdependent know-nothings -- or worse, into Trump-style know-it-alls, or camo-clad Survivalists who feel they do.

In that progression, lots of knowledge gets lost forever -- not only individual bits of knowledge, tragically enough, but whole systems of knowledge get lost, entire ways of seeing and knowing evaporate.

This is one of the many profoundly sad results of Europeans' many pushes across this continent, shoving aside native peoples already living here, and very successfully at that, for many generations.

These native peoples knew things we could never imagine and cannot and will never know -- useful things about life, living, how to keep going, what to do for food in winter, how to build a fire, or track game, or which herbs to use for ailments. On and on and on.

Now, we know computer apps for our convenience, for finding the nearest noodle place, or whatever, but not the actual knowledge one once took in hand and applied in life, in order to remain alive.

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An example of the gulf between then and now? All right: Try to imagine, for just a moment, that you are your dad's grandfather, set in a sod bunker, on the wind-blown plains, having arrived there at the tail-end of winter, and just before spring's breath is felt. You are intending to start farming. OK, then.... ready.... set... BEGIN!

[sound effects: stopwatch ticking; breathing; wind effects]

No, this is not a video game, nor even a remarkably lifelike IMAX piece or museum simulation or 3-D immersive experience, but Actual Life.

On the plains.

And there you and your family are, in your newly-constructed sod shelter, windswept, muddy, standing in ankle-deep water, exhausted, with a week's coffee, and maybe two week's of beans and flour, left in the larder.

Your move...

*

Pressing the elevator button is easier than walking the stairs -- but, it requires blind faith, not in oneself, not for knowing how to push a button, but faith in other people, not the least of whom is the elevator inspector. And the elevator manufacturer. And the building's maintenance staff. And terms of the maintenance schedule. And so on -- a very long list.

We all talk a good game, now and then, rhapsodizing about the rugged individualist's role in the country. There's still enough Neanderthal in our blood, or Cro-Magnon smarts in our guts, to look toward tall people as leaders, for their micro-advantage of height, of seeing a little bit further to the future, or farther to the horizon, than others who are shorter.

Tallness used to be a trait we'd equate to being able to use height to see over the tips of the tall grass. Now, it simply makes us psychologically more comfortable to have taller leaders, and without knowing why that is so.

Time to concentrate on what makes a good leader now.

The time of the hearty, hands-on, know-and-do-everything individualist has all but passed, leaving us to inherit a frail and fragile network of interdependencies that our fathers' grandfathers could scarcely imagine was up ahead -- and to that same wide gulf of understanding we feel when looking back.

You could say a greater number of us everyday folk have a chance of survival now, following the incredibly difficult work done by our forebears, whereas before, few of us may have made life's rough first cut.

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And so, here we all are, alive and living -- and not whimsically snuffed, and then figuratively (or actually) stuffed, and mounted, high up, on a wall, above a bear's den's mantelpiece.

Day in and day out, we take these interdependent roles for granted, without a passing thought -- save for our own roles in the evolved network and system of life: We do A and B for C and D, who return the favor and allow E and F to occur, thereby preventing the horror of G, H, and I -- and, well, frankly, to keep J through Z from happening, too....

*

That is the bargain we have wrought, called civilization, and that is the same bargain we keep trying to violate and repeal in our support of those who shriek their ignorance at us, and turn their backs on this most basic understanding of life -- that we no longer need each other, each other's skills, each other's points of view, one another's energies and abilities...

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Of course, it is difficult to work with people who believe that, by exercising your own rights, you are actually infringing on their rights -- just as it is difficult to work with those who believe that by removing your rights, that their rights are somehow well served.

We have heard lots and lots about Rights for the past fifty years. I'd like to propose an equal period of time in which Responsibilities are just as equally, and as fervently, discussed, shouted, and argued.

It has always been more fashionable to demonstrate how carefree one is, and how freely one's arms can be swung around, in any and all directions, without any consideration whatever to colliding with anyone else, or anyone's possessions.

Out on the prairie, flying solo, you can swing your arms around like windmills all day, every day. But, guess what? Look around. We've not alone, and this ain't the prairie.

* Meanwhile, we should be grateful for small favors, too.

Today, I am thankful there will be no President Christie, and, therefore, am grateful there will be no nationwide, 26-hundred mile freeway backup, for example, just because the Akron Free Shopper grocery store handout came down on the wrong side of the President's stance on tearing into automatic voter registration, say, because it represents a hated, intrusive, government-knows-best policy.... not when people can register to vote all by themselves, in a rugged individualist's way, by taking a couple weeks off work, and following these 89 clear-and-easy steps and procedures, easily accomplished at the following 17 city, county, and state government offices, provided they are done in sequence, or else applicants will have to begin the process again from the beginning...

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I am also grateful there will be no President Fiorina, so we won't have to bankrupt the country into global insolvency, bringing down everyone with us, simply to endure another lecture on how Dodd-Frank banking reform is the first step toward socialism, or how it was she came to be fired

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for being smarter than anyone else in the room, or how we have to lay-off half the country so the other half has a better bottom line.

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I am also grateful to not live anywhere near Fukushima, in Japan, nor, for that matter, near the Indian Point nuclear power plant in New York, where groundwater samples show leaks of tritium are 80% higher than reported on Saturday, when the leak was first reported.

In one groundwater monitoring well, the company reported last week, the radioactivity increased nearly 65-thousand percent.

NOTE TO SELF: Add "radioactivity" and "65-thousand-percent increase" to the list of panic phrases to avoid, unless absolutely necessary.

*

I am also pretty happy to not be living near the last holdout of the terrorist hold-up of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, where one terrorist is still confusing personal greed and self-interest for the right of free speech, threatening to kill himself because the federal government doesn't simply open its coffers and let him grab however much he wants.

Of course, he's had decades of watching Wall Streeters and Washington insiders pull that same scam -- fill your pockets, and dump trucks as fast as you can, and keep babbling creatively about how it's in the best interests of the nation.

There are number of people like this, and they all tend to fly the same flag -- the "Don't Tread On Me" special, the one with the small print which states: I'm Having a Greed Tantrum, So Go Away, Leave Me Alone, and Lemme Have Everything I Want, Want, Want!

*

Life has become too big for humans -- our only response to its complex demands was complexity of our own. We used to call it Civilization, where many are needed, and where the jigsaw puzzle of life has no spare or non-essential parts.

Unless you'd care to remember how to grow your own crops AND become your own doctor AND your own animals' veterinarian AND your own pharmacist AND your own hydro-electric and solar engineer AND your own nuclear safety scientist AND your own expert in domestic and foreign policy matters AND your own...

Maybe relying on others isn't so terrible, in order to do some of the work that you and I and everyone needs to get done.

Of course, it would help if we could agree on the best way to proceed, for the greatest numbers of people, but without leaving anyone out in the cold, and without leaving anyone behind.

That notion of the Common Good used to come issued with Common Sense. With some work, we might even pool our resources and see where our grandfathers stashed it all before they

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died. We know they had to have vast quantities of it -- they built and maintained an entire country with the stuff!

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Unless we remember how dependent we are on one another, and figure out the shared, human challenges on staying alive and moving forward -- and not just constantly re-playing a gridlocked game of Chicken as the precipice races toward us, we're going to be standing in cold, muddy water, in a sod shelter, on a windswept plain, low on supplies, heavy on exhaustion, wondering what to do, and how on earth we got here....

I mean, bear dens are cozy -- I just have no desire to look at one from the inside, from up high on a wall, over a mantelpiece.

*

Quotable Quotes:

That community is already in the process of dissolution where each man begins to eye his neighbor as a possible enemy, where nonconformity of the accepted creed, political as well as religious, is a mark of disaffection, where denunciation without specification or backing, takes the place of evidence, where orthodoxy chokes freedom of dissent, where faith in the eventual supremacy of reason has become so timid that we dare not enter our convictions in the open lists, to win or lose.

-- Judge Billings Learned Hand, one of the most influential American judges to have never served on the Supreme Court of the United States.

* Add-on Thought:

I especially enjoy the part about "...faith in the eventual supremacy of reason." I look forward to all Americans -- leaders as well as followers -- agreeing on a common working definition, then getting busy demonstrating that reason still exists here, that it can still flower here, and that it can still make a positive difference in our thoughts, words, and deeds.

If it can't -- we're snuffed, stuffed, and mounted.

Simple as that.

Resources:

Care to check politicians on their actual policies? Try here: OnTheIssues.org.

Learned Hand: https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Learned_Hand

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