

Being Reasonable

Plain Talk for Living in the Future

By

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Latest Edition

Preface

We get shocks in life; big, small, tragic, embarrassing - even funny - and they change you. For many years I ignored advancing age. I know how goofy that sounds but the mind is capable of powerful things. Then one day a girl behind the counter at Sears casually inquired, “Do you want that on your Seniors Club Account?” and the misty veil lifted. It seems the skinny, shaggy-haired, kid who flashed into my mind whenever I pictured myself was a fraud - only visible to me - while everyone else saw a pudgy, old, bald, guy, with sagging jowls and reading glasses perched on the end of his nose.

I weathered the moment well; even applied for a discount card. Later, wallowing in the throes of my favorite alcoholic truth serum, I concluded that the end of life may not be “way over yonder” as I had previously imagined. More to the point, whatever grand plans I put off all these years needed to be gotten on with. (Can you get post traumatic stress disorder from a sales rep at Sears?) In any event, the truth finally bubbled to the surface, so, welcome to the world of a recently “outed” old, fat, bald, and grumpy, political scientist.

This book represents a lifetime of learning displayed in as straightforward and compact a form as I could engineer. While writing, I worked at the book being more readable than all-encompassing and, although the contents are intended to be serious, my whimsical nature does have a way of sneaking out, (unlike my distain for proper punctuation, which is always in full view).

What I offer, besides old age, is a lifetime of thinking “outside the box”. Long before such a thing was cool I harbored a stubborn distrust for conventional wisdoms, making me one of those guys who always asked the “awkward” questions. This undoubtedly sabotaged a life of complacent normalcy, but it was still a good life, during which I was,

and remain, very blessed.

And now that I realize my existence is not an endless highway, I wish to share a few of my “eureka” moments. High expectations and a late start are not the best formula for leaving a legacy but faith, hope, and technol

Any book, of course, does not happen without help from others, (regardless of what the internet ads say). My wife, Jude, had to notice that I wasn't mowing the lawn, or working in the garden or doing any of the other chores assigned to me, but she blithely ignored my lack of contribution and carried on without complaint. The way in which she dismissed the extra expenses I was incurring was also notable and appreciated. Richard Forrest of Freedom Graphics Press was a goldmine of information and help. He published my first book and, in doing so, became a friend - one I have abused greatly. His knowledge of computers and publication protocols and his ability to create “mock ups” was beyond useful. This project may never have happened without him.

Along the way I also received much encouragement and many wonderful suggestions from friends. All of it was taken into account. Finally, I owe much to the staffs and faculties at the Political Science Department of Western Washington University and at Huxley College of the Environment. Universities are so full of inspiration and so critical of everything you write that, if you have a little discipline (and a hide like an alligator), they become a wonderful incubator for growth - provided you don't stay there too long and wallow in it. I especially want to mention the late David E. Clarke for his encouragement. He was an inspiration to many and I humbly include myself among them.

Thank you all.

Ross Urquhart

Introduction

“Be reasonable,” we are told, as if we are born understanding such things. Almost seven decades into this life and I’m still trying to figure out what that means. One lesson I learned is it’s an acquired skill – very slowly acquired in my case.

The ultimate goal of reason is to simplify our lives, bring order from confusion. However, to create reason we need a shared understanding. Everyone has to agree that one plus one equals two, two plus two equals four, and so on because if two plus two could also equal three, or sometimes five, and maybe on occasion seven, depending on which beliefs you were brought up with, major disagreements can never be solved. We need agreement to determine reason and we need reason to create predictability. Lack of predictability is chaos and lack of reason is how we define madness.

Throughout the ages having no universal rationality allowed cultural rationalities to arise. People rely on patterns to plan their future and sometimes, when we can’t find a pattern, we make one up. Life can be harsh and when we don’t understand why things happen we look for a workable explanation – right or wrong – and seize upon it to put predictability back into our lives. After thousands of years of filling gaps in our knowledge with fabrications and calling it reality, we are left with weak fundamentals for finding truth.

Galileo, one of the founding fathers of science, was imprisoned for proving the Earth moves around the sun. If it wasn’t for the fame and popularity he gained from introducing the telescope he most likely would have been burned at the stake. Obsolete “facts” die slowly and history is full of conflicts between the old and new. The Earth is not at the center of the Universe, nor is it flat, the position of the stars and planets do not define our personalities, and people do not mate with

gods to create superior individuals. Yet, since time began both believers and non-believer have suffered untold horrors as a result of these “truths”... and it continues.

Sometimes we look back and think how silly people were in those bygone eras, but a walk down any city street will find businesses offering to read tea leaves, the bumps on your head, or the lines on your hand, to foretell the future. The most powerful and, supposedly, technologically advanced government on the planet, the United States of America, changed the designation of a major national highway from 666, the Devil’s number, to something less threatening due to a fear the highway may be cursed.

Life has always contained a high degree of randomness and risk. With a little help from family and friends most of us find a way to make it a positive experience, although it’s never easy – and it shouldn’t be. A key impediment, however, is that far too many of these risks and stresses are manufactured and unnecessary. Life is incredibly complex, and one major contributor is living in a global society with tens, hundreds, maybe even thousands of diverse, strongly-held, and often nonsensical, cultural beliefs – all competing to provide a path to a livable future.

“Narcissus so himself forsook and died to kiss his shadow in the brook.” Shakespeare understood ego and what we are willing to sacrifice for its preservation. Families, communities, cultures, nations, races, religions – every person on Earth holds multiple memberships, and they all separate “us” from “them”. What gets distorted in this process is reason. To maintain our beliefs, we constantly must create more elaborate untruths to keep our “facts” in place.

Every family has a great heritage; every hometown has a proud history; every religion is the one true religion; every race is the superior race; and, as a nation... one reason we are the best is because we live in the best country on Earth, and by knowing and believing this we become patriots. The rest of the world, of course, lives in lesser countries and, as a result, can never be what we are, and by knowing and believing this we become bigots.

Doesn’t quite make sense does it – bigotry, patriotism, two sides of the same coin? But how can you call your country, your religion, your

home, your race, your anything, the best or the greatest, even by association, without suggesting that everyone else is less than the best – less than you? We are all taught to be proud of what we are because what we are is better. Imagine a world where 10 billion individuals are constantly being taught they deserve to be near the peak of humanity's pyramid simply because of who they are, where they were born, or what they believe. Now try and imagine blending this chaos of hungry, competitive, egos – finely honed by generations of continuous and aggressive self-delusion – into a co-operative and supportive world community. What do you think the odds are?

Each of the chapters in this book is an essay and each essay is geared toward exposing a form of tunnel vision. The symptoms include both not seeing obvious realities, and seeing ones that don't exist.

We are experiencing incredible population growth, and few people realize just how incredible, or what challenges are inherent in this growth, and it is taking place at the same time as incredible advancements in all forms of technology. Together, out of sheer necessity, these elements are forcing human society toward a level of global co-operation beyond anything ever believed necessary. If our nations are resistant to this co-operation, the price we pay may be very high.

Should future generations survive our egocentric legacy it probably means, at the very least, they finally learned a lesson we seem incapable of learning, which is, protecting your future is far and away a better choice than protecting your past.

Chapters

Section One

The Problem of
Leadership

- 1 – Sacred Cows
- 2 – War
- 3 – Nuclear Convergence
- 4 – Power
- 5 – God in Politics

Section Two

Confusing the Issues

- 6 – History
- 7 – A Fantasy Called Freedom
- 8 – Racism: A Part of Us All
- 9 – Good and Evil
- 10 – Truth, Reality and Language

Section Three

Spiritual Adventures
A Distraction

- 11 – The Meaning of Life
- 12 – Hallelujah
- 13 – God?

Section Four

Politics
The Hoped-for Solution

- 14 – Democracy and the Confusion of
Equality
- 15 – Democracy Interruptus

Section Five

Economics
Feudalism Refined

- 16 – A True Free Market
- 17 – Labor: The Tragedy of the Common
- 18 – Economics: Policy vs. Politics
- 20 – Shrinkage Shock

Section Six

Legalese

- 21 – Laws: Old and New
- 22 – Free Will and the Law
- 23 – What's in a Number
- 24 – Time
- 25 – Brain Train

And Finally

Crossing Boundaries

Section One:

The Problem of Leadership

I might have called this section the problem of followership. Too often we refuse our responsibility as good citizens, and we get angry and defensive when it is suggested that we are easily manipulated. In this “information age” some people say leaders are less important. After all, we can go online and find all the answers for ourselves. We don’t need others defining our lives. Still, as recent events have shown, we continue to fall in line behind charismatic individuals who promise us a more satisfying truth. One that sets us apart, and special. In a future where weapons of mass destruction are becoming more plentiful and threats to our living environment are growing, surviving perverse leaders may be humanities greatest challenge.

Chapter 1

Sacred Cows

Each and every leader desires to protect and enhance their role and that includes leaving us with a significant legacy.

There are sacred cows everywhere. Every country, every culture, every major organization, has a herd of these big, fat, lazy, creatures with sad eyes and floppy jowls wandering around, causing traffic accidents, pooping on your pavement and eating your daisies. Moreover, each herd has a host of supporters who tout their presence as such a blessing and privilege that the poor ugly animals have reached the ultimate level of protection – “untouchable”. Even if you hurt them by mistake you may suffer a severe penalty. Far too many of the ideals and organizations that govern our lives have been trampled and soiled by these beasts.

Every day their supporters take the dreams and oratory of our founding fathers, mix it with a deep need to feel proud and unafraid, and twist it into a complex bird’s nest of mechanisms to keep us at arms-length from these big stupid creatures.

Governments are the primary sanctuary for these sacred beasts, and it’s easy to understand why fundamental change is such a frightening concept in their minds. They already see themselves at the pinnacle of human achievement, so why change anything? Isn’t it obvious? How can governments not be the pinnacle? We’ve pledged allegiance to the offices they hold since we were five years old. We’ve stood up and sung the national anthem at every basketball, baseball, hockey, football and whatever else game we’ve gone to, and many other large get-togethers’. Tears have welled up in our eyes during war movies when our troops won heroically against great odds while the orchestra filled the

air with appropriately emotive military hymns. I'm damn proud to be a citizen of this country, even though I'm not quite sure how I can be proud of something I had nothing to do with. Change! That's crazy! This country is already the greatest on earth... just start adding up all of its greatness and the list becomes monumental. How can anyone not believe we are head and shoulders above the rest?

Sound familiar. It's not a new story and it's not consigned to my country alone. An important part of nationalism is educating your children into the special privilege of being born within your borders, and constantly reminding adults why they should support and contribute to their governing system. Some countries are better at this than others and some are so good it's scary, but the higher the quality of your propaganda the steeper may be the downsides.

If your system is the best in the world, the standard against which all others should be measured, why must it be open to scrutiny? Whatever small gains possibly occurring from change must be balanced against the risk of introducing weaknesses. Why mess with the best? It has worked so well for so long.

Of course, all the leaders in the country, whether government, industrial, or spiritual, agree and pay homage to the system. They have seen it in action, worked with it, and been brought forth to their exalted status by this system. It is a system that recognizes their ability and hard work and, certainly, their patriotism. If they weren't patriots they couldn't be leaders. In fact, if some youthful indiscretion is discovered, even long after they have established their leadership status, such as a one-time membership in an anti-government organization, or participation at a flag burning, or the discovery of a speech promoting fundamental change, their credibility would be suspect and their careers diminished or lost.

In financial management circles, there is a belief that the people who invest the greatest share of their wealth in a proposal are the ones who will believe in it the longest. We are taught to invest in our nations from the moment we are born, to invest our souls and, in times of war or crisis, to offer up our bodies, and we are to do this without question. Facing uncertainty, we are taught to trust our governing institutions – to hold sacred the founding principles, the workings of the legislature,

the office of the prime minister or president. They exist to protect us and have proven their ability over the generations. At least, so we are taught.

What makes us so sure these leaders, and the institutions they represent, actually represent us? What is forcing them to act in our best interest during a crisis, or at any time for that matter?

If our history books are to be believed the answer is, hundreds of years of refinement by the greatest political minds of each generation. It is they who have brought us this apex of democratic achievement enjoyed by all. A fortuitous succession of visionaries have laid the ground rules for our system's creation while heroes and martyrs sacrificed themselves to establish and defend it – and continue to do so even today. We can't dishonor them by suggesting we didn't arrive at the best system possible.

American Presidents hold the most powerful office in the world and what is their qualification for doing so? In truth, what could be anyone's qualification for holding such a huge responsibility? There have been better ones and worse ones but what stops the bad ones from creating disasters like the Vietnam and Iraq wars, or ignoring their own laws in famous cases like Watergate and Iran Contra, not to mention the almost weekly revelations of past smaller abuses. The decisions made in the Oval Office affect the safety and security of the whole world and some of those decisions have been very destructive. What protects us from them? The reality is, apparently, nothing, yet, to promote change is un-American.

Governments have learned how simple and emotional their populations are. We, the people, just want to live a happy life and achieve something worthwhile in the process. They, with the power of their intelligence, their reservoir of information, and their physical resources, are able to lead us in whatever direction they want, at least in the short run. We elected them because we believed they were special. We watched leaders from across a broad spectrum endorse and support them, brag about them, say glowing and heroic words in describing them. How can we not trust them? And when they achieve power they gain the ability to present an even stronger argument for their actions, which we, as individuals, don't have the time or resources to rebut. A representative

democracy depends on trust.

The fact is, once our governments are elected we can't stop them from doing whatever they wish. We can only vote them out the next time around. In the meantime, they control our nation's agenda – while we sit by and evaluate their progress and their eventual success... supposedly with the help of a hard-working and effective opposition party. Here's where more poop hits the pavement.

The opposition can never be as powerful as the government unless the government has made such a mess they oppose themselves. In the early part of any elected government the opposition is virtually non-existent. They are the sore-losers who couldn't get their act together and win. Even as time goes by, and heals opposition wounds, they never have the same access to information and physical resources as government, let alone to the power and majesty of “the office” the leader holds. Oppositions always play catch up and, at the same time, they are restrained from advocating changes that reduces the power of the “office” by their desire to wield the same power after they win the next election.

The various media used to fill in as a secondary, and more objective, opposition but governments have become so powerful, so good at out “spinning” the media, that the media is cowed into submission. The media are a business. They sell advertising and if they become unpopular no one will buy their ad space and they may go out of business. The media will attack a government or support a government but only if the popular flow is already moving in that direction. They kind of pile on after the fumble has been snagged by someone else.

When a system is that good at protecting itself, everyone is seen as a potential threat. In certain enlightened democratic countries if a popular female country and western singing group criticizes their country's leader they may be banned from radio stations, harassed by the media, vilified by government officials, shunned by other members of their industry, and threatened by anonymous callers. If a columnist writes a column that asks tough questions of their leaders for authorizing a military attack on another sovereign nation the story may not be published. If it is, their newspaper may lose much needed marketing revenue, their colleagues may attack them both professionally and personally and, regardless of their stance on other issues, henceforth they will be labeled

as biased in their reporting.

The system creates and protects its leaders by sanctifying the office they hold, and the leaders, in turn, promote and enhance the need to protect the system. Round and round it goes reinforcing itself at every turn. All the while generations are indoctrinated from birth, until death, in the greatness and supremacy of this system. To suggest that fundamental flaws exist; that protections against the abuse of power are woefully inadequate, that cabal elitism is rampant, and that an understanding and desire for real democracy is non-existent, is to call into question the entire heritage of the country; to fly in the face of every leader there is, and ever was, from the founding fathers to the next president or prime minister... and to open yourself to the distrust and condemnation of every “patriot” ever born under that flag. In effect, to seek improvement for the system is to be a traitor to it. How sad and frightening is that?

As for sacred cows... nothing nominated by the hand of man is sacred and, if you are asked to believe differently, you are following someone’s personal agenda. Only God can designate what is sacred and He doesn’t tell us about it. He gives us the wisdom to see it for ourselves.

Chapter 2

War

Anti-war activism on a large scale started with Vietnam and the military conscription required to sustain a foreign war. The idea of a democratic government made up of “old” men forcing “young” men to go and sacrifice - occasionally their lives - in an unpopular war, trampled the ideals of justice the “sixties” generation grew up with. It was their parents who fought against the tyranny and brutality of the German and Japanese war machines. These young people were immersed in a belief that their parent’s generation endured life-altering sacrifices to provide them with freedom. Yet, as young adults, they came face to face with the reality that their freedom was at the convenience of those in power.

In effect, the anti-war movement was precipitated by rhetoric drummed into the post war baby boomers by their parents and grandparent’s generation. The same generation that was now sending them to war. They soon discovered, like most concepts based on rhetoric, they don’t tell a complete story. In a war broadcast nightly on television, the lies were difficult to hide. Thanks to advances in technology, the hypocrisies became too available, and powerful, for the governments of the day to overcome. The war ended but the controversy probably never will.

However, like most governments, the learning curve is sharp when it endures humiliation, and changes were instigated to see it doesn’t happen again. The anti-war movement, in fact, all activist movements, have become subject to much increased scrutiny, and governments have worked hard at developing the necessary skills and resources to counteract domestic criticism. Under the present rules of governing, it will always be a constant battle to find the truth when determining the

realities of war.

That is a great loss because war is an event where interpretation is everything. Kings, prime ministers, and presidents might say, "I just sent those troops over there to protect our interests - purely a defensive action, we are not at war." When, of course, it quickly becomes obvious to anyone watching the news, war has already begun, and people might as well be laying bets on when their fearless leader will announce that, "Our citizens have suffered a cowardly and brutal attack and we were forced to retaliate." This happens so often it has become cliché. In the First World War the Germans fabricated French bombing attacks on Nuremberg before declaring war. In the Second World War Hitler claimed people of German heritage were suffering atrocities in countries on its borders so they had to rush in and defend them. On the surface, no one goes into a war willingly. They are all dragged in, kicking and screaming their desire for peace. It was the other guy's fault.

This does not say it's all hypocrisy. Wars can be both necessary and justifiable. It simply means that, regardless of whether they are or not, the general population is often resistant, particularly in the early stages. Therefore, they have to be duped into getting involved. Even the very hawkish United States stayed out of the First and Second World Wars for a couple of years until they experienced direct attacks on their sovereignty. Taking a combat role in either War was a tough decision for the US and, in hindsight, the First Great War in particular didn't offer any long-term solutions to problems, or create any net benefits for the nations who fought. Indeed, the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the First World War, played a large part in precipitating the Second World War.

World War II, on the other hand, had to be fought, and won, because it was a race war. If the Germans had won the Jews would have been eradicated... most likely followed by Negroes and anyone else who didn't look Aryan. That's the problem with wars over racial purity. The proponents never stop until they either lose or everyone left standing looks the same.

War is a very ancient and common phenomenon. There have always been wars and, even though we now live in a highly sophisticated and technological society, we continue to have wars - lots of them - in spite

of the well detailed reality that nothing damages a nation more than war. It kills our young people; some might even say the best of our young people. It puts at risk a large portion of our civilian population from various forms of attack. It empties our treasury and may leave us virtually bankrupt, even if we win. It brings about laws which restrict our freedoms, it gives enhanced and corrupting powers to our leaders, and it spreads a cloak of fear and paranoia over the entire population... and still we support our governments when they enter into a war. Obviously, we believe they are necessary.

I personally believe that war or, more specifically, the threat of war, is an essential part of international politics. For much of my life I couldn't articulate exactly why until, in my early forties, I read a book by Andrew Bard Schmookler entitled "The Parable of the Tribes". It managed to sort out the confusing muddle of ideas I had been packing around.

The parable itself is about a group of tribes living in an area large enough and rich enough to support each tribe – if they all wish to live in peace – and they all do, except one. One tribe is ambitious for expansion, even if conquest is the only option, so they attack a neighbor, kill its people, and seize their lands. Then they attack the next tribe, enslave its people, and seize their lands. A third neighboring tribe flees and settles into an area where the land is rough and difficult in an effort to avoid enslavement or death. Meanwhile, the remaining tribes are gearing up for war to defend against the aggressor.

All of the tribes except one wanted peace and as a result they suffered "destruction, absorption, transformation, withdrawal and imitation." Not one tribe remained untouched. As Schmookler states, "no one is free to choose peace, but anyone can impose upon all the necessity for power... Power can only be stopped by power." Simply put, as long as one group of people in human society are willing to use violence and brutality to get what they want, the rest of us have to be prepared for a fight, defending our families and ourselves. Whether this is happening in your neighborhood, your nation, or on the world stage, it is simply a fact of life that only the silliest of dreamers would try to deny.

The problem then becomes; even if we understand the necessity for an occasional war how can we know that "this particular war" is righteous... and when our politicians start promoting war how can we be sure

it is for the reasons they state and not part of some personal or lobby group agenda? I know that sounds paranoid. However, I'm not a conspiracy theorist and I don't believe that all democratic nations are run by clandestine committees seeking wealth and power. What democratic nations are run by is politicians, who need an incredible amount of resources to get elected, and re-elected, and when they finally leave the halls of power, through losing or retiring, they want a soft landing because they've gotten used to a pretty good life. It's just human nature but it makes them vulnerable. We don't elect saints. Anyone who has been part of any election process knows you must sacrifice little bits and pieces of your integrity to win the support you need to gain office. The saints leave very early in the game. What remains are people who like being at the center of power and need a great deal of help to stay there and, thus, are very sensitive to the needs of those who give them help. War is an incredibly large and diverse industry, employing hundreds of thousands in America alone, and it is sometimes used to support other large industries. The pressure on political bodies to see a need for war can, at times, be intense.

President Eisenhower may have been one of the most boring presidents, or politicians for that matter, in the history of America but as I've gotten older my respect for him has grown by leaps and bounds. His war experience as Supreme Allied Commander in WWII placed on his shoulders a withering level of responsibility. He managed the high stakes juggling act entailed in keeping the allies on the same path leading to D-day, and then the battle across Europe into Germany... and then he ran for President and won twice at a time when everyone expected a nuclear war could start at any moment.

As President for eight years during the Cold War, Eisenhower sat at the very center of political power and, as Commander and Chief of the armed forces which, as a man who had achieved so much in his military life, he understood it better than anyone. He was, arguably, at the height of knowledge about modern war. Yet, disturbingly, his final message on leaving office was to issue a warning to the American people to beware of the "military-industrial establishment". It was a surprising message and some thought it particularly odd given his history. Still, before the succeeding presidential term was over the United States was at war again, with North Vietnam. From the perspective of time it's hard to

imagine this was purely a coincidence.

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution is what created the U. S. war with North Vietnam and it was overwhelmingly passed by Congress in response to “unprovoked” attacks on the American destroyer, U.S.S. Maddox. These occurred on the evenings of August 2nd and 4th, 1964, and were perpetrated by North Vietnamese torpedo boats.

When Congress was informed on August 4th, by President Johnson, of these “surprise” attacks, they quickly passed this resolution retroactively approving his retaliatory air strikes and giving the President authority “to take all necessary measures”, including the use of armed force, as a means of protecting American lives and interests in that region. In effect, he was given the power to fight an undeclared war.

At the time, there was much fist pumping and rallying ‘round the flag especially when detailed reports of the attack hit the newsstands. As Time magazine described the torpedo boat assault on the Maddox:

The night glowed eerily with the nightmarish glare of air-dropped flares and boats’ searchlights. For 3 1/2 hours the small boats attacked in pass after pass. Ten enemy torpedoes sizzled through the water. Each time the skippers, tracking the fish by radar, maneuvered to evade them. Gunfire and gun smells and shouts stung the air. Two of the enemy boats went down. Then, at 1:30 A.M., the remaining PT’s ending the fight, roared off through the night to the north.

Richard Goodwin, a Whitehouse insider on the Johnson administration team, gives a different accounting from records he produced twenty-five years later in his insightful book, “Remembering America”. He described the testimony of his colleague, Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara who supported the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, as a “calculated, egregious deception of Congress and, indirectly, the American people”. Goodwin further informs us that:

Contrary to McNamara’s assertion, there was no clear evidence that in the shrouded evening hours of August 2, there had been any attack at all... a quarter century later, voluminous research has been unable to demonstrate that there was... McNamara knew this when he testified, and lied about what he knew... Before and during the “attacks” on our destroyers, South Vietnamese PT boats-directed by McNamara and

[national security advisor McGeorge] Bundy had been conducting hit-and-run raids against the North Vietnamese coast...Indeed, it is likely that the [American destroyers] had been sent to the gulf in order to create an impression of U.S. aggression that would provoke a "counter-attack." (Less than two weeks before the Tonkin incident, Johnson had anticipated that a "provocation" from North Vietnam might require a "response".)

No attack, according to Goodwin and others, most recently, it appears, McNamara himself, and still the President and members of his cabinet felt it necessary to seek "retroactive" permission to wage war... and Congress "overwhelmingly" and immediately gave them that permission. Why did the President want a war and why did Congress so readily accede to his wishes? Goodwin suggests that South Vietnam's corrupt and despotic government was about to fall to Communist insurgents and this would have made the United States look bad given the amount of military aid they been providing. Johnson, a Democrat, felt vulnerable to criticism from the "hawks" on the Republican side of the House. During that time, he was trying to enact some far-reaching and enlightened domestic legislation and he apparently believed that if he looked weak on foreign issues it would impact his ability to pursue his policy at home. Members of his cabinet, Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy and Dean Rusk, were very supportive and instrumental in Johnson following this course, spurred on with positive projections from the Joint Chiefs of the military.

As for Congress, they were presented with not just an emergency but a "retroactive" emergency. And the "facts" they were supplied with turned out to be highly suspect. Even so, to give open ended permission for a President to wage something as destructive and depleting as war was wrong. And, of course, a war that was begun to "save face" must be won, whatever the cost, because the future humiliation of losing rises with the investment.

As it turned out, approximately 50,000 American young men dead and hundreds of thousands more crippled and brutalized. Between three million and four million Vietnamese died and untold others had their lives destroyed. They are still dying fifty years later from unexploded mines and other ordnance. Is it really possible that this was all about party politics?

More recently the United States went to War with Iraq. The American people were told it was a necessary war - America had been attacked by terrorists and the brutal and unstable Saddam Hussein supported worldwide terrorism and was acquiring weapons of mass destruction. Secretary of State, Colin Powell, one of the most respected and trusted political leaders in his nation, went before the United Nations Security Council in February 2003 and presented evidence to support these “truths”, and shortly afterward the war began. These facts turned out to be not true but by then the war was underway so... too late. In his book Scott McClellan, former press secretary to President George W. Bush, called the Whitehouse’s attempt to sell the war in Iraq a “political propaganda campaign”, and went on to say that the war “was not necessary”. The facts George W. Bush was putting before the American people every night on the national news were not true but he wasn’t lying because, according to McClellan he “convinces himself to believe what suits his needs at the moment,” and, incredibly, he needed to attack Iraq.

Perhaps Bush didn’t like that Saddam Hussein had once threatened his father’s life, possibly it was the oil man in Bush seeing one of the largest oil reserves in the world shut off from America, or maybe he just needed to look tough on terrorism at a time when his hunt for Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan was a failure. Perhaps it was some combination of all three, plus hype from the war hawks seeking glory and pallet loads of cash.

During the Iraq war thousands more young people, both men and women this time, were torn from their families and buried with full honors and the regrets of their nation. Many thousands more returned home disabled and left to muddle through life as best they can. Financially, it cost trillions, which is unfathomable to most of us except that much of it was borrowed and, as a result, has left the United States with horrendous debts. Each and every citizen is worth less than they would have been if no war had happened and facing a much less bright future... and all because a “Whitehouse” wanted to go to war, for its own reasons. “That can’t be!” you exclaim, “Our system is the best in the world. It wouldn’t allow such destructive abuses of power.” As comforting as that thought may be it isn’t necessarily true.

War is a gigantic machine... often the largest single industry in your

country. When a government believes it has the power to achieve its goals through brute force, and they enlist the most brilliant and beloved people in the land to spin a tale of patriotism and necessity, what really is stopping it? Just the citizens – you and I – unorganized, uninformed, with few resources and less leadership. And if we do muster up the courage to demand detailed answers to tough questions, we most likely will be branded as traitors and cowards. Yet, if we don't, the people in government might make the most dangerous decisions in our history based on little more than their own personal agendas.

Chapter 3

Nuclear Convergence

So, what's the big hurry with this globalism thing? Humankind has been fumbling along as a species for the past 250,000 years or so – the last 10,000 of those as a civilization – and most people would agree that, generally, we've been going in a positive direction. We live twice as long as we used to, and in a more integrated and informed world. All the statistics suggest that fewer people, in percentage terms, die violently now than at any time in the last thousand years. Many fatal diseases have been overcome. The range of opportunities for self-fulfillment now far exceed any other period in our history, and we have accomplished all this in opposition to other nations and cultures. Indeed, war or the threat of war, often provided the impetus for scientific and social improvement. Why the big push right now for multi-national co-operation?

That's a rhetorical question, of course, because each of us can imagine at least one, if not multiple, impending crises threatening humanity's continued existence. At the top of my list of personal fears, due to its immediate dangers and dramatic impacts, is the proliferation of nuclear technology and materials.

The day is coming, perhaps very soon, when the world will see a mushroom cloud blossoming up from the heart of Washington DC, or Tel Aviv, or some other focal point for hatred by fundamentalist believers or misguided patriots.

Just by plotting trends in the migration of nuclear material, and its associated technology, and overlaying that with the many contrary versions of reality encouraged by both unstable governments and well-funded

terrorist organizations, then, by extending those plot lines to points of intersection, you arrive at a state of inevitability which is so frightening that few organizations want to go there... at least in public.

Human society is fundamentally peaceful according to any measurement based on individuals and communities. Still, we have the ability to morph into brutal, hateful, killing machines when convinced threats to our families and communities are in the offing. The difficulty for us, as individuals, lies in determining whether that threat is real or fabricated. However, we prefer to err on the side of caution when protecting those we care about. It doesn't help that leadership styles based on fear mongering and incitement have become a way of life in many places, not all of which are relegated to Third World countries.

You don't have to be a Political Scientist to understand that the majority of national governments are in the hands of strong personalities. An objective analysis suggests that most strong leaders have less desire to listen to the wishes of their populations, (despite what they say) than they have in channeling their nations into playing follow the leader. Power is enticing and addictive, and by realizing that the highly refined art of "spinning" facts has made it nearly impossible to determine truth, all that is then required to maintain control is a routine acceptance of government secrecy, leaving unilateral action as the leader's prerogative.

For thousands of years leaders have cashed in on two important lessons concerning outside threats. They bring the citizens of a nation closer together making them more supportive of government, and they distract the people from focusing on the quality of domestic policies... two highly sought-after outcomes by incumbent governments. It's no wonder individual leaders and ruling cabals continually use this tactic to strengthen their hold on power.

This, of course, creates problems for those who wish to replace their leader. Inevitably they are faced with two options. They can claim the outside threat is an exaggeration and a waste of resources, or they can validate the premise and suggest the existing leader is no longer strong enough, or committed enough, to provide the promised protection. The

latter has proven the easiest and most prominent route to power.

What this tactic accomplishes, is endorsing hundreds of years of suspicion, fear, and hatred directed at outside influences. And when populations raised on the propaganda of “my nation first and foremost” find their country shifting toward an increasingly global context, dissent easily finds favor among a confused population. Anti-change factions are never more powerful than in the midst of unavoidable change. All they need do is ask the question: How can our traditional enemies now be our long-lost friends? And the answers they receive are never quite clear.

This entire process might amount to no more than a “tempest in a teapot” if we didn’t live in a world where weapons of mass destruction are increasingly available and radical disillusionment with government is a growing trend. Yet, we do, and so the scenario for city center nuclear explosions is becoming more than sensationalist fiction.

If this sounds like the usual mumbo jumbo nuclear fear mongering, let’s check out some history.

One of my favorite frontier proverbs suggests that God did not make all men equal, Samuel Colt did, and there is truth in that. In a world where war is a continuing reality the quality of your weapons may be your most direct line to security. When the United States first developed the “A” bomb it took barely half a dozen years before the USSR followed suit. When India became a nuclear power Pakistan quickly found a way to match it. When the nuclear power England attacked Argentina in a dispute over the Falkland Islands was it any surprise that Argentina actively began seeking nuclear capabilities. Israel is a nuclear power and since that discovery many other Middle Eastern nations have been seeking to equalize the situation; from Libya and Iraq’s failed attempts to Iran’s more likely success.

Following the Korean War the leaders of North Korea began a quest for nuclear weapons which has since been confirmed, to a point where they are now suspected to be engaged in the lucrative sale of weapons technology, both in bombs and long-range delivery systems. But how does tiny little North Korea become a powerhouse in nuclear and missile technology? Apparently, where there’s a will there’s a way.

When the USSR disintegrated into its member states Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belorussia inherited the vast majority of the long-range strategic warheads along with ninety percent of the tactical warheads (still leaving 1300 tactical warheads in the hands of the eight other separating republics). The former soviet military hadn't been paid for months - which became years - and senior government bureaucrats were facing similar hard times. The country they had worked for no longer existed and their long service to the fatherland counted for nothing - zero - zip - zilch. According to a December, 1991 issue of Time magazine, Vladlen Sirotikin, a well-known Soviet political columnist, stated "give me a million bucks and I'll have a nuclear-tipped missile stolen for you and delivered anyplace you want." Such was the volatility, disorganization, and desperation of those times.

Along with the vast military being cut loose to fend for itself a huge infrastructure centering on nuclear research became superfluous and orphaned. Scientists accustomed to being held in high regard and treated with respect and privilege were now cast adrift, along with their families. Is it no wonder that when buyers showed up in search of their expertise, the eagerness with which they abandoned their now dysfunctional posts and streamed to greener pastures was matched only by the excited bidding for the services - and when this expertise is readily available only one serious challenge remains?

It takes about 12 to 15 pounds of plutonium to build a viable nuclear device; twice that if enriched uranium is used. In the former Soviet Union about a million pounds of enriched uranium and a little less than 200 thousand pounds of plutonium were slated for salvage from existing devices, as well as from scattered nuclear facilities. During the 1990's there were often media reports of black marketeering in the former Soviet Republics, and of sting operations that discovered foreign governments were actively seeking nuclear arms and weapons grade fissionable material. The amount of activity and the desperation of the times make it virtually impossible to accept that all of these buying trips were thwarted and unsuccessful. Little doubt remains that the technology and the fissionable material is out there in circulation. The question is, in whose hands?

Most likely it ended up squirreled away in the vaults of various governments; creating hope that it will not become a pressing problem. When

governments develop a nuclear capability, it is generally to create a deterrent. Similarly, weapons delivery systems, both long and short range, are built to keep your enemies at a respectable distance. If a government were to use a nuclear weapon it would more than likely bring a retaliatory strike, perhaps in kind. No group representing a recognizable nation wants to initiate such horror and suffer the legacy of revulsion and eternal condemnation from subsequent generations. The more obvious threat lies in that confusing assemblage of ideas and activities we call terrorism.

Terrorists represent a struggle, whether based on past injustices, present ignorance or future dreams and aspirations. They seldom fall neatly into fixed borders or represent a well-defined group of people, and they often believe their cause is universal as it speaks to greater ideals and beliefs. Some terrorists, often the more fanatical, base their passion on religious conviction and see their reward coming in the afterlife.

No matter what drives them, the formless and borderless nature of terrorist organizations make them a difficult target to hit – and that leaves them less reticent to use whatever means is available to achieve their goals. If terrorists were to explode a nuclear device in the heart of their enemy's territory where would the retaliation be directed? In other words, what difference does it make if you have a massive army, navy, and air force, complete with the latest technology, and an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction – all propelled by an off-the-scale fury incited by a nuclear attack on your homeland – if you have no place to point them. The deterrent value of your weaponry goes pale in the face of terrorism. There is no balance in the equation. What could your nation do that constitutes adequate pay back?

Compounding this sense of vulnerability is an understanding that any response against a sovereign nation, on the grounds that a terrorist group selected land within their borders as a headquarters, would be seen by the rest of the world as a wrongful attack.

Disagree? Or, perhaps you believe that world opinion would support a retaliation in the aftermath of such an attack; think again. The massive military of the United States was kept at bay for almost ten years in their efforts to find Osama Bin Laden because he was living in Pakistan, a so-called ally of theirs. And this man led an organization which

leveled the World Trade Center and took the United States into a war killing thousands of their young people; not to mention changing the day-to-day life of every American, all due to the threat of more Bin Laden attacks hanging over their heads. Missions into sovereign Pakistan to find Bin Laden could be viewed as a threat by other nations; and a call to arms against the perpetrator, perhaps leading to an increase in terrorism as a response. This was a risk Obama took when going after Bin Laden and we still don't know all of the ramifications.

Back in the realm of all things nuclear, even if, following an attack, it was possible to round up all the responsible terrorists and put them to death, chances are their numbers would in no way equate to the damage they had already achieved. Nuclear destruction is too horrendous, and too long lasting for a response that is, by any definition, satisfactory. It is, I am hesitant to say, beyond revenging.

Every government undoubtedly bears a portion of the blame in this evolving and inevitable trend toward widely distributed weapons of mass destruction. Firstly, by playing the "us" and "them" card so passionately in their need to move critical inquiry away from domestic problems and, secondly, through their physical contribution to the spread of nuclear technology, and materials, by seeking them for their own stockpiles. It all builds toward the eventual crescendo. The more the fires of hate are stoked, and the supply of horrific weapons are diffused throughout the world, the more likely they will fall into the hands of groups whose conscience has been burned away by the powerful rhetoric of injustice towards "their" people.

Great injustices, perpetrated by one people against another, are far too common in recent history, and it makes no difference whether a role reversal would have turned the victims into the oppressors. The intensity of the hatred remains. Yet, people are people and very few real differences separate one group from another. Other than tradition, or fulfilling the wants and needs of our leaders, why should what my ancestors did to your ancestors, or vice versa, be a valid reason for us to kill each other? How ridiculous can we be? Realities of "us" and "them" are wrong headed and destructive and too often a function of a particular leaders need to gain, or hold onto, power.

Nuclear weapons technology has been around now for so long – almost

eight decades – that modern, easily accessible, information systems provide detailed drawings, specifications and explanations to help you build your own. It's not quite that easy but the expertise is available and, with enough money, creating a viable model is not a large obstacle. At that point, it simply becomes a matter of acquiring some fissionable material. Uranium and plutonium are two of the densest elements in the universe. Enough plutonium to build a Hiroshima size bomb could be carried in the palm of your hand (provided you were properly shielded) and a similarly destructive amount of refined uranium would be about the size of a bowling ball.

Terrorists do not need missiles to deliver their bombs. They prefer to do that in person... and most likely it would be delivered in pieces and assembled on the spot. Not a difficult operation, and as for the chance of being discovered and captured while sneaking it across a border, both uranium and plutonium can be easily disguised and molded to fit in a small space. When you consider the thousands of pounds of illegal drugs and other contraband that cross borders every day, the risk of catching well organized terrorists transporting weapons grade material would be extremely low. This is going to happen. Bet on it. Our entire world is moving in that direction. It amazes me it hasn't happened yet. And the only thing that can alter this event is the realization of its inevitability.

Our only hope, and it's a slim one, is that somehow, somewhere we can find a group of uncorrupted, unselfish, clear thinking leaders who are willing to devote whatever skills and charisma they have to convincing everyone that there is only "us" on this planet and no "them".

Chapter 4

Power

War is a mess, even if it's a sometimes necessary mess, but how do you avoid becoming involved in the bad ones, the stupid ones, the unnecessary ones? The answer lies in better understanding ourselves. What makes us tick?

One of the wisest statements about human behavior I ever had the good luck to absorb was the Lord Acton quote, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". Many people attribute this to Winston Churchill because he used it famously in a well-covered parliamentary debate, but I don't care who gets the credit; it still ranks near the top of my "awe inspiring one-liners" list. Not only does it define a significant aspect of human nature it also informs you that the amount of corruption experienced is directly related to the amount of power granted... and it doesn't just happen at the top of the pyramid.

As a child did you ever play baseball or soccer in a game that had special rules because the kid who owned the ball demanded them? Have you ever been scolded by a parent, teacher, or employer, for doing something you see them get away with all the time? Whether it's the captain of your bowling team, the leader of your kid's Sunday school, or the President of the United States, the abuse of power is ubiquitous and insistent. In our everyday connections, it runs the gamut from street level bureaucrats in corporate or government offices up through authority figures like ministers and police officers – and on to presidents and prime ministers. We have all witnessed or, more likely, experienced first hand, how power does corrupt, and how it corrupts in relation to the amount of power held.

One of the founding fathers of political science, Max Weber, defined power as, “the probability that an actor in a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance.” In other words, power gives you the ability to follow your own desires, “despite resistance” which, admittedly, is not the same as saying “without consequence”. The possibility exists that you may pay a price, but it usually comes afterward, and only if you don’t have enough power to exempt yourself.

Fundamentally, power displays itself in two forms: Personal power, which may be physical, intellectual, or related to the possession of desirable resources, (large, charismatic, wealthy men for instance) and, secondly, the power of Authority, granted by existing policy or statutes and supported by a governing body. They often link together because of how we envision leadership. We routinely place people with strong personal power in authority positions creating “double-whammy” power situations. Regardless of how power is attained, once you sit in a privileged position, and are able to significantly impact the lives of others, it changes you; how you view yourself, and how you view the people you gain influence over.

Although power may corrupt it doesn’t necessarily criminalize. Corruption covers a wide array of behaviors from displaying false pride to promoting pure evil. Most power players never venture beyond the self-indulgent conceit of believing themselves superior, and entitled to privileges above and beyond generally accepted norms – such as being rude and uncaring to people seeking help. If you live in an urban setting hardly a day goes by when you can’t find a multitude of illustrations for this truism. Indeed, the abuses of power are so common that when you meet people in powerful positions who are respectful and attentive it sticks in your mind as an anomaly.

Power affects our opinion of ourselves. If other people see us as important it has always followed that we see ourselves as important, and the more important you are to them, the more important you will be to yourself. Very rarely do people resist. It is simply a matter of time before most succumb to the enticements of power; in fact, for many, it is the reason they actively seek and embrace power.

In general, being given control over other people’s lives, and exercising

that control, is a fulfilling personal experience.

Power satisfies a need deep within us; it validates our hopes and dreams; it provides us with more resources so we can seek to satisfy all of our wants and needs. Powerful people have more options to use for advantage. At the highest levels, it holds the promise of fulfilling our every desire. Power feeds our fantasies, sometimes overwhelming our value system. Priests who abuse children, police officers who commit crimes, sometimes in plain view, educators who trade better marks for favors, construction, health, or safety inspectors who look the other way for a payoff, politicians who swap the best interests of their constituents for money to support their next campaign – most get away with it, reinforcing the notion that power is the ultimate trade good. Is it any wonder few of the people who chase power, and achieve some measure of it, don't want more?

Power is synonymous with respect and status and opportunities for acquiring wealth while, at the same time, it helps avoid the mundane indignities which most of us live with. You go to the head of the line, if any line exists at all for you. Power may simply be the ultimate measure of success.

There are downsides; we live in a Yin/Yang world where every action has an equal and opposite reaction, you get nothing for nothing. (Was that using or abusing the vernacular?) Even if you exercise it wisely people normally resent you having power over them, particularly when it's obvious. If you have some measure of control over others you reduce the predictability in their lives, which is frightening and stressful, and it makes you the focus of their weaknesses and fears. The perks you gain from power are tempered by the fear and resentment it generates, and this places you in a precarious situation. Power puts you under the microscope and focuses attention on every action you take or word you say, and if this scrutiny creates enough distrust, or fear, in the wrong individual, you may be subject to threats and stressful situations of your own. Is power worth the risk? It must be; just look at the number of people actively seeking it.

Every human being on Earth is unique and feels unique and feels special. You can't avoid it. It's something we are born with. According to socio-biologists it is this same inherent belief that drives us to pass on

our genetic code to the next generation. Those who don't possess it fail to reproduce and, as we are here reading this, it means our antecedents responded to that drive. But, even as highly social and competitive animals, feeling special within our selves is not enough. We need confirmation for our feelings. We need others to recognize our specialness, so we may assume the trappings and enjoy the benefits of being elevated in society.

We are all willing to accept that we carry the potential for greatness and when others see fit to stroke that belief, and make it more tangible, we are vulnerable to the attention it brings – and the delusions of importance which grow from it – and it doesn't matter if they grow to a level where we may accept rights and privileges long past what the average person enjoys or, in some cases, not ethically belonging to any human being.

As citizens, we may all demand equality but, in fact, genetically, what we all truly want is to be more equal than others; to have access to rights and freedoms, goods and services, that others don't. The genetically driven goal of every individual is not equality but superiority, because every individual has evolved a drive to achieve greater distribution of their genetic material.

How many mothers and fathers do you know whose goal in life was producing children who take up space in the world? Parents dream of a superior life for their child, a life of recognized accomplishment and achievement along with the spoils entailed to that achievement. Equality may be what we have learned to want for everyone else but what we want for ourselves, and our offspring, is privilege. It's a very basic element of human nature, existing since the dawn of our species, but it is socially unacceptable to admit a disdain for equality. Therefore, even when we are obviously pursuing special privileges we either flat out deny our goal or make excuses that deflect criticism away. The failure to accept this leaves us unable to deal with the contradictions inherent in our actions and opens us up to the creation of powerful and corrupting offices.

The concept of democracy was created to avoid this weakness within us. Democracy was created to redistribute power; spread it among many people so no one person, or small homogeneous group, could be

corrupted by it – abusing it for their own benefit. Democracy grew from an understanding that no special incantation or elixir can protect individuals from being corrupted. We may change the person who holds power but we can't know how much the next person will be affected, or how long it will take before they fall prey to the enticements. It is simply a matter of time. Democracy was created as a reaction to the fact that who we were before assuming the mantle of power isn't who we will be afterward.

This isn't to say that powerful people can't accomplish truly beneficial goals for all. Many do. However, it is their choice not ours, and often it relates to the legacy of greatness they wish to leave. Of course, just as many leave a legacy that is anything but great. If that sounds harsh make a list of the politicians you know who kept all their campaign promises and left their political office substantially more open and accountable than when they found it. I'll bet it's a short list; and how many politicians can you remember who voluntarily resigned when they failed to meet the expectations of the people who elected them? Whether they bring corruption with them or develop it slowly as they spend time in the position, sooner or later people with power begin to see themselves as above the rest of society, and capable of making judgments, and decisions, which they have no right to make. Spreading the power among many people is our attempt to combat this aspect of human nature.

Where spreading the decision-making load isn't feasible, we try to create and maintain oversight systems. Unfortunately, most societies are lax in recognizing the extent of the problem and how vulnerable we are to these abuses, so the oversight is often more theoretical than real.

The absolute most frightening situations occur when an "office" is so powerful it gains control of its own oversight. Leaders seek to maximize and protect their power believing, or at least stating, it is for the benefit of all. Dictatorships are the worst offenders but democratic leaders are also capable (some say even prone) to such endeavors. They simply have fewer tools to construct their empire; relying on secrecy and the creation of fear against outside threats, which only they can protect you from – such as weapons of mass destruction.

Presidents and Prime Ministers may be the leading contenders in this

group but other wings of government or even government departments can fall into the same category. Politicians regularly exempt themselves from laws that investigate individual citizens, or they invoke a list of special provisions, usually not widely known, when questioned about suspicious activities.

Military organizations avoid scrutiny by claiming the need for secrecy, as does any agency operating in the context of national security. Even police have been known to claim they are the only ones capable of investigating themselves, and that they shouldn't be held to the same standard as the rest of us. (I agree on that point. They should be held to a higher standard.)

How do you argue with these organizations? As individuals, it is far too intimidating to engage in critical debate with any of them. Their ability to hurt you is far beyond your ability to hurt them or, if they see you as a threat, to even defend yourself. We regularly elect governments who promise to fix these abuses and bring "transparency" to the process of governing, but it seems once in power, they see fulfilling these promises as a risk to maintaining power. The classic response is to delay and study the problem until they eventually come up with legislation that's long on talk and short on teeth.

Obviously, we have a problem with the way we have created democracy. We have been unable to offset the growth of powerful offices within our system. As our populations increase, and each individual's impact is thereby reduced, it becomes even more difficult for the citizenry to exert control over its governing bodies.

Democratic governments were designed with checks and balances on the misuse of power but those who designed the system were, in most cases, theorists, who sold the positivity of their dream to an eager populace. Once in operation the system becomes dependent on the values and desires of those who control it. As with any grand enterprise, the devil is in the details. Once power corrupts those who have it, and they develop methods for avoiding close scrutiny, or claim the right to police their own actions, it is an open door for the creation of conflict and deceit that often takes generations to recover from.

Do you believe your government is entitled to ignore the best interests,

or even the expressed wishes, of its people? Few do, but all major governments have that ability. If you disagree ask the question: Where are the checks and balances right now? Are they still working and, if so, who says so? Who can you honestly trust to be objective within the system and where is the transparency that allows people outside the system to evaluate it? What is the evidence that the system works compared to the evidence that it doesn't? We live in an era where a few hundred representatives can govern hundreds of millions of people, have absolute control over trillions of dollars in revenue, enough war machines to wipe out all life on the planet ten times over, and they perform these duties while constantly being heralded as the ultimate triumph of freedom and democracy. Wouldn't that change the way you measure your worth to society and, over time, distort your opinion of yourself?

Chapter 5

God in Politics

How leaders change once they are elected is a vital link in understanding politics – but let’s take a step back and try and find out why we elect certain people in the first place. There are many reasons for us to select one individual over another, some weirder than others. To me, realizing the importance of a spiritual presence in candidates turned out to be a true revelation.

God turns up in the strangest places – in politics for example. I’ve often wondered how a process so constantly in the public view manages to create such metaphysical mysteries? You would think in a democracy, because we elect people about whom there is so much existing information, both from their own words (of which there seldom is any shortage) and from detailed public records of their accomplishments, we would have a thorough understanding of our candidates. And because of this, you might think we would only ever elect the best and brightest. Yet, we appear to choose more truly odd individuals than truly special ones. What confuses us? Why don’t we elect more top-notch people as our representatives?

Firstly, it must be remembered that we don’t go looking for our political leaders. They come looking for us. Candidates select themselves to run for office and then try and drum up support for a nomination. It’s sometimes called the Muhammad Ali electoral process. One person stands up and announces “I am the greatest, elect me because...” and then gives a list of their qualifications. Meanwhile another person is saying, “No, forget that turkey. Elect me. I am the greatest,” and gives their reasons... and voters like us get caught trying to chose between

them.

Secondly, no matter how glib and folksy they try to be, politicians are generally people we don't personally know. We get to know them through the literature they leave us, or the speeches they give, but this is pure salesmanship, and we seemingly understand that. Of course, each candidate also makes sure we know detailed information concerning the less savory aspects of their opponent, giving us a dark side for each competitor. Although the combination may appear to provide some balance, knowing the exaggerated highs and lows of each political hopeful doesn't really tell us much. Most lives are lived somewhere in the middle.

As a result, the conditions that attract us to one particular candidate are more likely to be something less tangible and obvious... like their appearance. Are they pleasant to look at; do they have regular features, clear skin, good teeth, are they athletic? How do they sound: Do they have a good speaking voice, confident, clear, with resonant tones, and lots of amplification when necessary? Do they have good posture, dress in respectable but stylish clothing, do they wear glasses, and if it's a man, do they have lots of hair (sorry, it's a pet peeve)? Did they come from a loving family? Do they have a loving family, with beautiful children and an attractive spouse? All of these issues consciously or unconsciously have an impact on us, even if it doesn't quite make sense why it should.

As a matter of fact, from a purely representative viewpoint we might question how someone so fortunate – born with talent, intelligence, family, good looks and charisma – would possibly understand the wants and needs of someone like, say, me? They haven't lived my life, or anything close to it. Still, I will most likely choose them to govern my life. And if you believe yourself exempt from this argument because you adhere to party politics, you're wrong, political parties apply an even more stringent checklist to their candidates.

One line of serious research on this subject suggests we, unconsciously, look for people to lead us who have a direct relationship with God. If you believe in God, and most of us do, it is rational to accept that having an "all powerful being" on your side will be of great benefit and, it follows, that we are more likely to gain His presence if we elect a per-

son who appears singled out by Him in the first place. Someone who is adorned with unearned gifts – appears favored so to speak.

If you feel this line of thought is off the wall, wait until the next election and watch and listen. You will hear many allusions to the candidate's "blessings" (and where do blessings come from), which may include their appearance, athleticism, business acumen, family connections and whatever other "God-given" talents and benefits exist and, coincidentally, there always seems to be footage of them going to church and being welcomed by religious leaders. How many Presidents of the United States had well publicized meetings with Billy Graham on the way to the Whitehouse?

A candidate's handlers and spin doctors are well aware of how this process works. It is simply understood that candidates must appear to have God in their corner if they wish to win, and a squeaky voice, Coke bottle glasses, a poor physical presence, or a bald head, make it tough to convince the electorate they are one of His chosen people.

This isn't a new concept by any means. According to anthropologists it's been going on at least since the beginnings of civilization. When the tribes of the forest moved out onto the plains, settling down to farm, their earliest political leaders were priests. Once they established property, planted crops, and domesticated animals, the population couldn't just run off to a better place when times got tough, like they did as nomadic hunters. They needed a buffer against the plagues of insects, marauding animals, and extreme weather. God was their protection and priests were their intermediaries. This relationship continued as populations grew from tribes into city states, nations, and empires.

Recorded history is full of local and regional gods, and the battles for supremacy among priests and religions as they fought to gain control of their "flocks", but as populations expanded, and became more sophisticated, so did the relationship between God and Country. In more recent millennia the Roman Emperor Constantine, who understood this dynamic better than most, took over the Catholic Church and became Pope to solidify his control over what became the Holy Roman Empire.

Later many European countries adopted the principle of "Divine Right of Kings" where national leaders were specifically selected by God to

govern, and if you didn't obey them God would punish you. During the coronation of British monarchs, they are still anointed with oils ordaining them as Gods representative on earth. For thousands of years the Japanese Emperor was believed to be a direct descendant of their supremely powerful goddess of the sun, and wasn't regarded as a regular human being until he went on radio for the first time at the end of World War II and informed his nation about the unconditional surrender. That was an incredibly traumatic event for his people. How could God lose a war? China turns out to have a far more enlightened take on the situation. Their leaders have a "Mandate of Heaven" where they rule with God's authority – but only so long as they do it wisely. If they get a bit too much into themselves they can be overthrown... with God's approval. I think that has a nice ring to it.

With democracies, it's a bit more subtle. They have no Devine royal connection to bring God over to their side so they have to work harder at the concept. The United States expressed a policy of Manifest Destiny at one point in their history where the proponents believed God had given them the right to encompass and govern all of North America, and beyond, whether the targeted nations liked it or not. (But then God does bless America.)

In a democracy, individuals arise from the masses, (unless their name is Bush or Kennedy or some other semi-formal royalty) and creating a direct line from God takes extra effort, but is doable. I remember once during the Reagan years a major television network announced on the national news that the President was found to be a direct descendent of an ancient English King and they only had to go back about a thousand years to find the connection. I guess God created spin-doctors too, but then it's understandable because God appears to be very much an aficionado of politics, and it's not just individuals He selects for leadership roles.

It's amazing how many times God favors one political party over another or one country over another when He selects them to win battles and wars, or to march on to victory at a world cup soccer match or Olympic event.

Having God on your side works, but when all of the candidates in the running claim the same relationship it's hard to test the hypothesis.

Once elected, with a record to run on and the party machinery in place for the next election, it is much easier to be re-elected – so God gets a bit of a rest during succeeding elections. You still need to maintain the connection, which means you can't afford to be seen as particularly greedy or horny or deceitful but you can back off a bit on the hairspray and shoe polish.

Personally, I prefer politicians who are a little less god-like and a little more obviously human. I don't mind if they are religious so long as their faith doesn't override the wishes of the people, but I want my politicians to have flaws. I believe people who have had to struggle, to overcome real adversity, are more likely to be compassionate and empathetic – and to have a value system less focused on appearance and more dependent on personal integrity and principle – what they can achieve for everyone, not just themselves. Their life may not form as pretty a picture but, then, even as a child I was taught that God helps those who help themselves.

Section Two:

Confusing the Issues

How do we know what we know? From learning, of course. Yet, only some of the things we learn make an impression. Every day we encounter knowledge that leaps out at us in red flashing letters while words on the same page, or in the same speech, are a blur, and fall on deaf ears. I suppose every educator, (and public figure), would like to know ahead of time which information will resonate and have the greatest impact. Many studies have been done on this, and the majority suggests that for new information to be remembered, and trusted, it must be relatable to information you already have. In other words, if someone making an argument touches on information you already embrace, and expands or supports it, more likely it will be believed – but, the monkey wrench in this reality is, what if the information you began with is already flawed?

Chapter 6

History

Our model for how to live our lives is passed down through the ages and comes to us both anecdotally, from those who are important to us, and formally, from our educational institutions. The past surrounds us and is constantly reinforced by popular books, television, movies, and all other forms of media – most of which invoke a generous use of nostalgia to provide legitimacy to their message. The question is, should we look to history for answers to modern problems? Does our historical record provide the information we need to survive the challenges faced in today's world? I say no.

There are many theories about the relationship between time and light but I have a favorite one. We learned from our high school science that everything visible in the universe gets that way by how light is reflected off its surface. The various wavelengths of reflected light provide us with the differing colors we see, which delineate every image that is channeled to our brain and into memory – but where does all that light energy go once it is reflected? Some of it gets absorbed into other objects. However, the rest streams out into the universe in a steady moving picture of everything that has ever happened since the first rays of light struck the Earth. It's like the pictures we have of the other galaxies out in space. We aren't seeing them as they are now but, because of the huge distances between us, we are seeing them as they were when that light left them, thousands or even millions of years ago. A few fanciful scientists have proposed that, one day, we might be able to go out and capture the highly diffuse energy we have been emitting and reassemble the time line showing the Earth's entire history; every second in

complete detail. Can you imagine such an event – everything that has ever happened on this planet displayed for all to see?

It sounds ridiculously impossible but, then, a few generations ago most of the science we take for granted now was also thought impossible. So, what truths would this timeline uncover and, if given the opportunity, what would we look for on this timeline? Would we peer into the lives of our ancient heroes, or the sacred founders of our religions or, perhaps, the personal lives of our loved ones (that's a scary thought)? No doubt we would do it all.

Of course, unless we had a high speed fast forward it would take a lifetime to watch even the highlights of history. The first multimillions of years would just be a blur. The time from the Agricultural Revolution might be a bit more interesting leading into the era of the Greeks, Romans and Egyptians, and anyone else who began recording their history. How similar would their record be to what we were watching, and how would it change us knowing the difference between real and fictional?

History is huge. It's everything that has ever happened anywhere in the universe and, more importantly, our understanding of history is what shapes us into who and what we are. History is, ultimately, a subjective study. We don't learn history to cure the common cold or write better software or repair a motor vehicle. It's not a professional or trade skill. It's a means of self-discovery. Our curiosity about ourselves compels us to learn history – to want to know more about what we are – both the highs and lows. We may visualize our future from the present but we extrapolate it from the past. The future is an extension of our past and knowing that past provides shape and substance to our dreams for the future.

Unfortunately, (or maybe fortunately) at the present time we don't have access to this stream of pure information flowing out into the universe, so we are left solely with what has been recorded by other people. This is barely a record of one tenth of one percent of our human existence, let alone the billions of years of pre-history... and it must be understood that the quality of even this miniscule amount of information is highly suspect. The enormous gaps in our historical knowledge have become filled in by speculation and, over time, this has taken on the trappings of truth in most cultures. Indeed, in the last fifteen hundred

to two thousand years, war and persecution have become a way of life based almost entirely on differing interpretations of supposedly pivotal events in history.

Was the original Jewish homeland Jerusalem, or was it somewhere in Egypt? Is the Pope God's senior emissary on Earth? Are Muslims infidels defiling the Christian Holy Land, or are Christians infidels defiling the Muslim Holy Land? Should the Protestants or Catholics rule Ireland? If Hitler hadn't chased his Jewish physicists out of Europe, and over to the United States, would he have developed the Atomic bomb and won the war, enslaving all of us?

We define ourselves, our families, and our nations based on our vision of the past, and if someone – particularly someone outside our circle – changes that past, we see them as trying to change us. Perhaps even to lessen our value. Cultural “histories” are what we construct to create and justify our status in this world and, on the down side, it has also been used to justify all manner of mindless death and suffering in the name of revenge or “cleansing”.

The reality that certain long past events occurred may be unquestionable, but whatever truths propelled them, and whatever context they grew out of, died with the primary motivators, and any actions we precipitate to fulfill our “historic destiny” is the result of writing fiction into fact. Was it a great victory or a massacre of women and children? Who started it? Who was right and who was wrong? Who says so? If you took away the hate would there still be a good reason to seek revenge? History is not science. There is no test for objectivity, and even if there were it wouldn't change the minds of those who believe in “their” history.

Historians, themselves, attempt to find the relevant truth in every situation. They do so by concentrating on the study of broader behavioral patterns generated by select events, or conditions, which altered our perspective and, as a result, changed our behavior. From this information, we have learned to accept that our modern identities are a product of various wars, famines, plagues, voyages of discovery, mass migrations, and whatever else has been designated as pivotal in creating our present circumstances.

Two lessons that emerge from the study of history are our desperate desire to live in a secure environment, and that attaining security is a product of understanding. If we understand how something works we can predict its actions, and gain peace of mind by being able to prepare for the consequences. A vicious dog, a deadly virus, a nuclear equipped nation... we study them all because we need to know ahead of time how each will react under any circumstance.

However, it's generally accepted that the study of history gets a bad rap for being boring and irrelevant, often because of how it's taught. But once you boil history down to the information you can rely on, mostly what's left is dry facts, and without a detailed, dependable, context, that is boring.

Objectivity may be the goal of true historians but subjectivity is the goal of history readers. We don't have to go back very many generations before there is no "Diary of Anne Frank", or archive of documentary news footage, or plethora of biographical papers left by the major players in history, and it is those pieces of information that create substance and reach out and connect us to the past. Samuel Pepys diary told us as much about the failure of the English republic and the return to monarchy as the stalwart historians did. (And as a bonus, of course, he also told us about the joys of seeing women's underwear drying on a line.)

Stories of the past written by biased contemporary writers or, years later, by historical interpreters, are often used as the basis for those who wish to reconstruct the past. And it's often difficult to refute the distortion. The reality is, once back beyond the years when a hungry and competitive media recorded and interpreted everything of importance, we enter the realm of low confidence, highly biased, information – what we now refer to as propaganda.

Complicating the issue, much of what we know in the long past comes to us from the perspective of the elite classes in society. They were the educated and could record what they saw and, as well, they were often at the center of change. Their activities were concentrated in the fields of government, religion, business or teaching and, as such, they became the scientists, writers and historians of their age. Scientists and philosophers in particular, gave us a great deal of our history.

Their discoveries brought about wholesale transformations in the direction and composition of their societies. Up until a couple hundred years ago scientists were primarily discoverers who went looking for new phenomena. Virtually anyone could call themselves a scientist with a little knowledge and the time and resources to investigate ideas. Indeed, a political scientist friend of mine used to say that at the time of Goethe it was literally possible to have read every important scientific text of the day. You could know everything that had been scientifically discovered, analyzed, and the process used. Talk about a know-it-all. At the present time, you couldn't keep up with the volume of new ideas published in scientific journals on any given day.

Having the elite in society write history wasn't a particularly bad idea, at least in theory. What caused problems was the age-old relationship between science and power. For most of our history new ideas and discoveries had to agree with the ideas power supported. No information was allowed to exist that wasn't approved by representatives of God and the King, and they had their own agendas. At a time when our understanding of all things surrounding us was sparse, highly suspect linkages were created and much valid information was discarded because it didn't fit with the reigning conventional wisdom. This helped lead us to accept a largely fictional past, which, even though it was proposed to us by the popular scientists and historians, all were at the mercy of those who wielded power. Add in the modern understanding that most facts are really interpretations, and throw in the limitations of language, and even if you are consciously trying to be objective, very little of our past can be proved beyond any reasonable doubt.

One of my personal favorite examples of this interpretation revolves around our myth of creation. Many people still believe that some 6000 years ago God created man from dust, named him Adam, and placed him in a specially protected garden called Eden, and we were tossed out of this garden when we sampled forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. Other historians say this was a tale first told by the Mesopotamians thousands of years before Christ, and passed on to the Semites of Old Testament fame when they occupied that same region generations later. It's an allegory that depicts the time when our ancestors left the bounteous and protective confines of the equatorial forest to become farmers on the exposed plains around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

The tree of knowledge is the fruit of civilized existence and sampling it renders us unable to retreat back to a more fundamental hunter/gatherer lifestyle. Adam is the Semite word for man... and women, by the way, were said to have invented agriculture and, therefore, civilization. That is why Eve is the villain.

If you read it as an allegory it gives you a completely different view of Genesis. Whichever reality you personally subscribe to neither one can be proven and, as a result, each of us forms an opinion based on our own wants and needs. What creates the horrors of our past, and present, are that too often people appear willing to kill or die for whichever point of view they choose.

True historians know that historical accounts are merely viewpoints on what may have happened. Winston Churchill once bragged during a fierce parliamentary debate that history would show his position was the correct one because he would write the historical account of that argument in his favor – and he did write, and see published, his own history books. This practice is more natural than it is unusual. Witness the famous dictum, “history is written by the victors”. Those who lose the fight seldom get to determine who are the good guys and who are the bad, and what were the circumstances of the battle. Not that their account would have been any less egocentric.

Furthermore, the winners of the next generation of battles can, and do, rewrite the past at their leisure. One of the perks of power is the ability to reach back into history and change things to suit your present agenda. George Orwell in his famous work “1984” coined the parsimoniously perfect term “newspeak” to describe this activity, which we more commonly refer to as “revisionism”. Either way, saints are routinely changed into thugs and thugs into saints supporting the political needs of the day. For all of these reasons human history has become a tapestry of popular myths, and so embellished and enhanced by the leading storytellers of the time, that the details become little more than a history of propaganda. The wars did take place, the earthquakes did happen, the voyagers travelled there and back, the books were published, the discoveries were made, the cure was found and the Queen was crowned. It’s important information. The ancillary data, though, should remain a matter for interpretation, thoughtful consideration, and skepticism.

Still, tragically, our nations and cultures construct a definition for themselves from these embellishments, which succeeding generations sanctify and pay homage to. And it's done with such ferocity that far too often they see fit to arm their children and send them into battle to protect these myths.

If someday we do find a way to capture that stream of moving light going off into the universe, and set the so-called record straight with actual replays of every event, I sincerely hope a far higher level of social maturity has been attained than exists now. If the degree of intellectual and cultural growth necessary to achieve this technology hasn't brought with it an understanding of how inconsequential the details of history truly are... than knowing the truth about our past will probably create more problems than solutions. Regardless, even now it should be obvious to anybody experiencing the tiniest bit of enlightenment that using past decisions and beliefs as a guide for the future is a tricky and dangerous proposition.

Chapter 7

A Fantasy Called Freedom

One confusing lesson we learn from history, and it is repeated daily throughout popular media, is that freedom is one of our most powerful and emotional concepts. “Live free or die.” “Give me liberty or give me death.” So, strong is this belief we absorb it into our comprehension of what life is, and accept that without freedom we can’t truly experience living.

Most often, the people who you hear this from are smart politicians and political activists. They are the ones who climb aboard the freedom train and ride it to glory, all the while warning us of threats, which only they can protect us from.

The news media continuously feeds this anxiety with articles detailing every potential loss of freedom, large or small, because they know it hits home. To emphasize this belief, our country has sent soldiers – all of them volunteers – to risk their lives fighting and, on occasion, dying, to establish free societies in far off countries.

Given that we have put our concern front and center, you might expect a high level of understanding about this concept. But, if you were to stop a random sample of people on the street and ask them to explain freedom – and how we achieve it – I doubt if you would find one in a thousand who could give you a sense of what freedom actually is. How is it that something so apparently vital to the human condition remains wrapped in such mystery and ignorance?

Freedom, as defined by Political Science, is the ability to convert impulse into action without constraints. In plain words, to do what we

want when we want. Obviously, no one will ever be that free, at least in a civilized society, because it conflicts with the freedom of others. Your freedom to rant and rave and scream outside my window just because it feels good, infringes on my freedom to enjoy peace and quiet. In a twisted sort of way, the closest thing to true freedom exists in a dictatorship, but only for the dictator.

On an individual level, when someone demands freedom what they are asking for is three things; they want equality, the right to be treated like everyone else, they want the security of knowing their equal rights are actively being protected by government – and they want choice, the ability to construct their lives based on their own decisions.

Although none of us may ever become a dictator and experience the grand concept of “Freedom”, those of us who enjoy the extreme good luck to live in a democracy are entitled to certain “freedoms”, which attempt to give us equality, security, and choice – the freedom to participate in our government through choosing representatives, or voting directly on issues, the freedom to express our opinions publicly, the freedom to travel within or outside of our homelands, and freedom from discrimination on the basis of age, gender, skin color, religion, sexual orientation, and more. Those freedoms are real and tested, enshrined in our constitutions, enforced by our legal systems, but even they exist within certain limits. If you are, for instance, leaving the country to speak at a White Supremacist convention on the joys of gay bashing, or joining your pedophile club in Thailand for its annual get together, you might still encounter a few roadblocks.

Freedoms are not God given. They are granted and protected by the existence and enforcement of laws. One of the most popular myths concerning freedom is that laws restrict freedom. The central tenet of this belief is, supposedly, fewer laws equal more freedom. In a small way that’s true, nobody likes “Keep Out” signs, but in a larger way, without laws freedoms wouldn’t exist. Unconstrained freedom is freedom for the strong to abuse the weak, for the majority to punish the minority, and for the brutal to terrorize the peaceful. Where human laws aren’t in force the law of the jungle is – might makes right – and in the jungle only the strongest survive. Unconstrained freedom protects no one. There are no natural freedoms or rights to protect those who can’t protect themselves. Remember the guy who wants to rant,

rave, and scream outside my window... that's why we have "causing a disturbance" and noise bylaws. The hard lesson is, odd as it may sound, that to enjoy freedom you must be constrained.

One painful example of the complex relationship between laws and freedoms occurred in the United States during the first decade of this century, where deregulation had been a theme among powerful right-wing political organizations. During the Clinton and Bush administrations these strong conservatives were at the center of policy making and were able to reduce the "weight" of laws on financial institutions, giving them more "Freedom" to achieve their goals. What this helped bring about, of course, was the proliferation of poorly researched sub-prime mortgages, which were then bundled into packages and sold to banks around the world at bargain rates. Their predictable failure gave us a worldwide credit crunch followed immediately by a global recession, frightening job losses, a devaluation of personal resources, and a future containing massive national debt. The unconstrained "Freedom" given to these institutions became our global crisis... and during a crisis, personal "freedoms" are placed at risk. The lack of laws governing a few very rich and politically powerful individuals brought about a reduction in shared financial resources for all of us, thereby limiting the range of choices we have... as in the case of the supreme dictator, more "Freedom" for the few means fewer "freedoms" for the many.

On another level, (he said climbing down from his soap box), our ability to exercise personal choice is constrained by more than financial resources. We all experience physical handicaps, gaps in our knowledge, fears and phobias, which prevent us from doing what we want.

I have terrible eyesight, get vertigo when I look down from a tall building, and have never taken any flight training, so if I decide to jump in the pilot's seat of a 747 and go for a loop about the airport, I'm going to be in real trouble... and perhaps many others as well. External constraints in the form of laws, regulations, and accepted public norms, attempt to control our behavior because we rely on protections provided by our society – and societies provide that protection by controlling the selfish or irrational urges of the individual. If we choose to ignore constraints, exercise more freedom than we are allowed and indulge our individual needs at a cost to the group, we risk losing our freedom completely. Life in a free society is still a tightrope walk, especially

when all of the complex social conventions are factored in. Crossing them may not put you in jail but they definitely affect whether people trust you. Try finding someone to sponsor your passport application if you're the guy who cuts his Dobermans loose every night to run the neighborhood.

Freedom isn't a drug, an ecstasy, a lifelong high. It's a constant struggle for every individual. A complex balancing act with legal and social responsibilities. Keeping that in mind let's go back to the idea of our soldiers in foreign countries bringing freedom to their people. Just because you eliminate a tyrannical regime doesn't mean freedom is the logical outcome. There has to be the building blocks for it within that society, an individual and group willingness to accept laws that apply equally and govern virtually every aspect of your lives. If that doesn't exist, it takes generations to bring about. It has to evolve from the inside out, wherein every individual understands and accepts that enforced equality – a popular constitution – is the cornerstone of freedom. You do not release a society from its chains and hand it freedom. All you are handing out is anarchy, and anarchy is a vacuum where the pretentious and the charismatic seek to fulfill their own agendas.

Freeing a country from oppression is not a short-term undertaking. It's the beginning of a long learning curve and anyone who says differently is misleading you. Why we believe a foreign army can rush in and chase away the evil dictator, pat itself on the back and then go home and celebrate victory, is a complete mystery because experience has shown that all you have really accomplished is to make room for the next evil dictator. On the other hand, if your country understands the scope of the commitment, and volunteer soldiers are carrying the burden, I do believe trying to establish a framework for freedom, wherever it's needed, is one of humanity's most worthwhile endeavors.

So, why do we have these weird fantasy notions about freedom? Where does the confusion arise? Some of it, without doubt, is history, or the fictionalizing of history, and how our need to create a good story reduced the struggle for freedom down to an array of climax events where great heroes won the day. Indeed, great leaders existed who had the courage and vision to bring about change, but mostly what they did was create a strong sense of entitlement among their people, which led to a demand for better treatment and a willingness to fight for it. These

leaders were consensus builders who created a powerbase of support and used it to gain concessions. Few were either as dynamic or fierce as they are often portrayed. However, their very real legacy has been enhanced over time and we now carry with us a fiction of larger-than-life heroes who provided us with this larger-than-life Freedom.

This fiction has become universal and culturally embedded to the point of being difficult to deal with. Many people did sacrifice themselves but it took hundreds of years to arrive at a point where all of us learned to sacrifice bits and pieces of our “Freedom” every minute of every day in order to share in the “freedoms” we all truly enjoy.

Still, go to a movie, read a book, watch a television show, and what we see are fictional heroes who are lone predators; self reliant, independent, surviving and wining against all odds, able to exist outside of laws and conventions, free from social responsibilities and the wants and needs of mere mortals like the rest of us. This has become our ideal, our vision of what we should all aspire to be. It is boring, I suppose, to exist in a reality where freedom is dependent upon people conforming, following laws and regulations, accepting constraints. We all would rather dream of being that super hero, who ignores the shackles of freedom and still wins the love and support of the masses, but it is so much a pipe dream, so distant from reality, that it distorts our understanding of freedom. It also sets us up for tough-talking ambitious leaders who play the role written by this mythology and subsequently lead us into situations that hurt us more than help us.

Real freedom is as much a responsibility as it is a gift from our predecessors, and its overwhelming complexities can be so exhausting that we even build structures in our lives to hide from it. Modern life can be like living in a cage built from laws and, although we pay lip service to rebelling against them, we spend much of our energy building more walls inside our cage. Structure is our security. For the vast majority of us who live in an urban, socially sophisticated reality, every movement we make, every minute of the day, has a hundred choices and each has a consequence – what do we say, who do we agree with, what do we like, where do we go, when should we do that – and we are responsible for picking the best option to fulfill both our immediate and long-term needs. That may be our freedom but it’s paid for with the stress of constantly making the right decisions.

To soften the impact of that stress we add more structure. We join organizations that help define us to ourselves – community, political or religious organizations – where we are offered a framework for making complex decisions and a code or moral compass to guide us. We establish routines, rituals, patterns, habits, whatever you want to call them, to ease the constant decision-making pressure. Every morning I follow the same routine, get out of bed at the same time, eat the same food, say the same things to my wife, dress in the same type of clothes until, finally, I arrive at a point on the clock when I have to start making real decisions. It's all very blind and mechanical and I have a thousand other built in routines and responses for the regular activities of my life – because I don't want the constant stress of making decisions about how to organize each waking minute. Acting automatically reduces stress and allows me to save energy for the more difficult challenges. Order creates freedom and freedom allows us to impose order.

Pure, unconstrained “Freedom” is a myth, a fantasy concept. We don't have it, we don't want it, and if we were imposed upon us we would likely go insane. Smaller “freedoms” are all that can exist in a complex social environment, and even they must be constantly re-examined to ensure they aren't attained from an unreasonable burden upon others.

Laws do not constrain freedom, they make it possible, and in a free society we express our wisdom and maturity by accepting that we must consider the welfare of others in living our own lives. Freedom is, in fact, the ultimate dream of perfect equality. A dream where everyone gets the same rights and protections, and we all are given the same access to choice. A dream we attempt to achieve by writing laws that extend the same privileges and enforce the same constraints on everyone. It isn't perfect because we aren't perfect but, as a work in progress, it's far easier to improve on this concept than one whose foundations are built on overblown rhetoric and nonsensical history.

Chapter 8

Racism: Part of us All

Racism may be the most confusing of all human evils – and one of the most misunderstood. We tend to focus on racially motivated injustices and brutalities, and the waste of human potential that accrues from both, yet, when it comes to solving the problem, we relegate that to governments. It's their job to write better laws and expand the enforcement. We may have come miles in understanding that racism exists, and how it damages everything it touches, but we have not gone a hundred yards in understanding why it exists, and what each individual must do to combat racism. For me to put you in that frame of mind I need to provide a compact, high speed, overview of human biology and history – so please hang on. If you get lost just keep going. I repeat myself a lot.

I'll bet you didn't know that race is a biological term. It refers to animals, or plants, different from others in their species as a result of hereditary traits. Species, by the way, is generally determined by the ability of members to successfully breed with each other. Seeing as the three major human races, Negroid, Caucasoid and Mongoloid (complete with approximately thirty sub-categories), can successfully interbreed, we are all subspecies of the same species, Homo Sapiens.

Distinct subspecies, or races, are categorized by the existence of various unique physical traits developed over many generations as a means of adapting to specific environments. Generalized differences in size, shape, skin color and internal organ capacity, for example, are all environmental adaptations occurring over millennia and relating to the physical survival of individuals.

The stimulus for these changes occurred under the duress of diet, cli-

mate, altitude, terrain, and types of predators and prey. Just as one example, take the black skin of both African and Australian aboriginals. Genetically there are many differences between these peoples but they share skin color because dark skin is protection against excessive ultraviolet radiation – just as light skin, because it has less pigmentation, is more readily able to absorb ultraviolet radiation. Lighter skin peoples adapted in the more northern regions where not only is there less direct sunlight, but more clothing is worn. Without this lack of pigmentation, they would not have been able to absorb enough sunlight to produce a healthy supply of vitamin D. In other words, the color of our skin is a genetic adaptation to the climate our forebears migrated into.

To emphasize this point even further, scientists, most notably, molecular geneticists like Alan Wilson at Berkeley, have traced human origins to a single female living in Africa between 100,000 and 150,000 years ago. She has been dubbed the Mitochondrial Eve. Such pronouncements may be more dramatic than realistic but little doubt exists that the entire human species is descended from a small group of individuals who established themselves in North Africa and from there spread all across the world. There is some controversy over which human species spread first but ours seems to be the one that survived. From this perspective, you could say that our entire species is the progeny of Black Africans. That should roll a few red necks over in their grave.

Migrations out of Africa and into the rest of the world continued, with the migrating populations subsequently expanding and adapting to fit their environment, right up until the advent of the Agricultural Revolution, which occurred between 5000 and 10,000 BC. (Only an Anthropologist could call something that happened over five thousand years a revolution... but it was revolutionary in scope.) Humankind was moving from a nomadic hunter/gatherer lifestyle to a life based on agricultural, living in one place, growing crops, and raising animals. It had never been done before and it eventually changed our entire species. It created civilization.

Agriculture changed hunter/gatherers into farmers who, when times were good, had a surplus they could trade with others. Trade brought accumulated wealth, which didn't exist in the nomadic days. Accumulated wealth brought territorial acquisition, and territorial acquisition brought the concepts of ownership and borders. Territorial ownership

and borders subsequently brought conflict and war over those borders; war brought alliances and treaties; and alliances and treaties brought “us” vs. “them” based on what side of a line you live on, we call it nationalism, which continues to this day.

The advent of civilization also began the process of remixing the races. Trade, population growth, and the search for more wealth, led to improved technologies. Boats that could travel to far away places, and make it back, with cargo, and, occasionally, strange looking visitors. Races have re-mingled for the past 10,000 years to a point where little separation exists. We are all hybrids originating from the same gene pool and, as such, separating the various races under any circumstance is purely an issue of social perspective; a cultural construction... racism.

Over the centuries, racists have reached into religion and science to support their ideas, and promoted the concept of breeding for superiority (which they defined as breeding more people like themselves). Generally, this included ignoring or condemning any information that disagreed with a belief in the pursuit of racial purity. Various religious leaders have promoted racism, just as some renowned scientists have abused their intellect to support the cause. Still, most religions at least pay lip service to the concept of “everyone equal under God”, and science tells us that “pure” breeding is a polite euphemism for “in” breeding – where breeders seek to isolate various desirable traits by breeding from a select gene pool.

Unfortunately, for racists, time and time again it has been proven that traits associated with superior individuals such as honesty, courage and self-sacrifice are neither related to physical appearance nor genetically transmittable. In fact, in a truly biological analysis, breeding members of a species that are not closely related is more likely to create superior offspring through a process called “hybrid vigor”.

None of this information is new or difficult to understand. So why would entire cultures, whole generations, choose to ignore this knowledge in favor of concepts that are based on irrational, and obviously false, information. At the heart of that puzzle lies a true understanding of racism, and it is where we are going, I hope, but first, more background.

For scores of generations many of your personality traits were seen to reside in your “blood” (DNA, in modern parlance). It got to a point during the early 20th century, up until World War II, where famous “race scientists” like Max Gunther would point to a region in Europe and say that people born there will be... and then go on to assert in disturbing detail their fixed and unalterable character traits covering everything from integrity to sexual proclivity. And, as you might guess, where he was born people had superior blood coursing through their veins. Adolph Hitler and Mussolini were big fans, as were many royalists and political leaders, even in North America. It was taught in schools as science.

Mans inhumanity to man during World War II changed this popular outlook drastically and the scientific theories of J.B. Watson and B.F. Skinner subsequently took over as the reigning conventional wisdom. They proposed we swing to the opposite end of the spectrum; we are born a blank slate and our personality is completely the result of environmental conditioning. That held sway until the late 60's, when the weight of evidence from cognitive learning specialists, ethnologists, socio-biologists, and many others who studied learned behavior, accepted the understanding that we arrive on this earth with “behavioral predispositions”. Perhaps as much as 50% of our personality is predisposed from birth... and one of the strongest of these predispositions may be xenophobia.

Xenophobia is a fear of, or hostility toward, strangers, and it, along with inclusive fitness, is the root cause of racism. Virtually all animals are xenophobic. It's an ancient defense mechanism and, therefore, it became a genetic trait. In human prehistory for hundreds of thousands of years our predecessors roamed the forests and plains of Africa living in kinship groups, or clans, of approximately twelve adults and eighteen sub-adults. When times were good, and the group had low mortality, it would expand until almost doubling, and then split into two groups, which would go their separate ways... the new group moving to occupy another territory. The area humankind lived in was large, all of Africa, with a whole world to migrate into, and the population was low, so interaction outside the family grouping was limited to chance encounters with other clans and, perhaps, seasonal gatherings at prime harvesting sites.

Evolutionary biologists now suggest that because of this prehistory we developed an individual orientation, and behavioral pattern, defined as “inclusive fitness”, which is centered on loyalty to tight family groupings. Outsiders were to be feared. They were competitors in the constant search for food and for prime areas of shelter from the elements and predators. During this era only the strong survived, particularly in times of scarcity, and one of the required strengths was a suspicion of people you didn’t know, and a willingness to sacrifice for those you did know. If you weren’t fearful of strangers you were more likely to be captured or killed... and the more different someone looked, or acted, or sounded, the more you must be suspicious of them.

For hundreds of thousands of years this survival mechanism was a necessary cornerstone in the makeup of every successful human being. If you didn’t possess it, and wandered around like a Dodo bird, you and your genes became just as extinct. The obvious fact that we are here means that we were born with this predisposition. It is part of our human nature.

The bad news is that, in a civilized world where we constantly interact with many different people, the more different they are the less likely we will trust them – whether conscious of it or not. It’s built in. With education and training we can reason away our racial suspicions but we cannot eradicate them. They are genetic, always there, and when we are very tired, stressed, or “under the influence” the race demon can leap out and surprise even us.

This is not a justification for racism. Recent history has proved that we can control our suspicions, and look beyond physical differences – valuing the qualities a person develops and earns. But we can’t be complacent. Racism is far more subtle and more personal than most of us imagine. And understanding how easily it can be brought to the surface, and inflamed, is a necessary part of living in a civilized world. Time and again history has shown us vulnerable to charismatic leaders who take the differences in others and designate them as dangerous or simply wayward and, from this, deprive them of the rights and privileges all of us depend on. These leaders create fear and turn it into hatred for others, and we fall for it because we have this weak spot in our nature, which we don’t understand, or which we deny even exists.

Are you a racist? Yes, but you can't admit it without disturbing the people around you. Like many situations in our lives, the first step to finding a solution must come from learning and understanding that the problem exists. Once we make that personal acknowledgement we can prepare ourselves for when this little piece of genetic coding rears up like a virus and tries to become part of the decisions we make about each other. Until we understand its nature this bug is free to roam around our attitudes seeking to attach itself to any and all parts of our lives.

Chapter 9

What's in a Number?

Is it a crime to be a number? I know you can't be arrested for it but you can be accused - "Do you want to be just a number!" It's like someone asking, "Do you want to be just a nobody!" Once upon a time there may have been a connection, but it's long gone.

Yes, I want to be a number. Emphatically I want to be a number. If I were a number or, more likely, some combination of letters and numbers, at least it would be my number. Right now, I have a name but lots of other people have the same name and it leads to confusion. And my name is supposedly unusual, or so it appears when few of those who try to pronounce or spell it do so correctly – and, of course, this leads people to believe there is just one of me when the closest city phone book shows at least three of me living there.

In effect, I am already a number. To every organization and form of government in the modern world I exist only on a digitalized database. That means my name has been reduced to a long string of 0's and 1's on a hard drive. Unfortunately, it's not a unique set.

But names make you special; numbers are dehumanizing; so say those who fear change, and their statements may carry some truth only because it's human to prejudge and confuse, and be manipulated by the fear mongers. I think names are dehumanizing. My last name is my father's last name. It's his father's last name, and his father's fathers last name and on for hundreds of years into the past.

Apparently, my mother wasn't worth such recognition, or her parents, or my grandmother, or her side of the family. In fact, I had sixteen great,

great grandparents, all of whom contributed an equal amount of DNA. Still, I only acknowledge one as my predecessor and ignore the rest. That is our tradition. It's not a big deal that it insults the women of our culture, not a big deal to me anyway, mostly because it's not a big deal to the women in my life. They seem to understand that names aren't that impressive. They all changed theirs at one point in their lives.

On the other hand, numbers might actually be more humanizing. It's human to want both an attachment to the community and to be unique within that community, to have a sense of belonging and a separate identity. A combination of given names and a number provides you with that. Family names are arbitrary, handed down from people who, after a few generations, share so little with us that a shared name is ultimately meaningless, although we work at attaching meaning to them. We put things in names that aren't there.

According to Shakespeare, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," which may be true in molecular biology but not from human experience. Perception is based on whatever senses are brought to bear and when something either looks ugly, smells bad, feels slimy or sounds harsh it prejudices our appreciation of all aspects of its character. If a name is rough or silly sounding, or similar to words in our language that mean something gross or embarrassing, we feel sorry for the person or uncomfortable around them, and it affects the way we treat that person.

In addition, when we first hear a name we automatically assign a culture to it, along with all the baggage carried therein, and, for some strange reason, if we happen to share a last name with somebody famous it makes us feel good. We feel a connection to their success and the more people with that name achieving widespread success the more special we feel. The opposite is also true of course. If your middle or last name is Hussein would you name your child Saddam?

Why should we identify with people who share our last name? I did the math; chances are we have little more in common with them than with anyone we meet on the street. Are we that hard up for something to feel good, or bad, about?

A number, on the other hand, may say nothing about me. Personally,

I hope it would at least say what year I was born and, maybe, where. People are always asking those questions right after they ask me for my name and how to spell it. And then, to make matters even more confusing, I get asked for my number all the time. What is your social insurance number, your drivers license number, your medical card number, your VISA number, student number, employee number, seniors card number, not to mention all the phone numbers in my life – and I have to have them handy or remember them all, which is less and less the case.

Why can't I just have my given names and a worldwide one-of-a-kind identity number? It would be my social insurance number, my driver's license, medical card, student, senior's, and Lord knows what all else number... maybe even my phone number. Wouldn't that be simpler and less preconditioning than a last name? Wouldn't that tell more about who you are and leave out a lot of goofy guesses about who you might be based on that family name? Wouldn't it be less confusing to every organization and bureaucracy that deals with you and, thus, place you in a more predictable and safer world? Obviously, I think so, but given our fear of change and reverence for all things "family" no doubt we'll have to wait until there are a billion Bob Smith's and John Chan's in the world before we decide to get serious about changing anything.

In the meantime, to those who, for whatever reason, ask about my cultural heritage I'll keep explaining that I am an old, fat, bald, and grumpy, middle class, Canadian, and my ancestors all came from wherever they happen to be, and died doing the same things everyone else was doing, and that so few of my closest relatives have the same last name that I can't possibly be related to anyone you know.

Chapter 10

Good and Evil

How basic can you get? What is more common, and overused, than ideas like “good” and “evil”? You might think that knowing the difference between them is obvious, even intuitive, any fool should know that... but it’s not true.

Given a choice, few of us would choose to be classed in the “evil” category, although some may absorb a certain perverse satisfaction from the power it entails, (and we pray they are a small and tortured minority). However, even more disturbing is the reality that such labels hardly seem to matter when few people truly understand them. Asking someone to define good and evil gets you answers like, well, “good is being nice and evil is being bad” – better known as defining by vague synonyms. The reality is, these words are so commonly used to describe people and organizations it might behoove us to possess a fair knowledge of what they mean.

Simply stated, good is the sacrificing of yourself for the benefit of others, and evil is the sacrificing others for the benefit of yourself. Stripped down to the bare essentials the definition is obvious and straightforward.

Sacrificing for others is a natural human endeavor; witness child rearing which, if done properly, is a continual sacrifice in time, energy and other resources for the benefit of someone else... albeit someone who shares your DNA. Since humankind’s earliest beginnings when the group has been threatened individual members have sacrificed themselves to save the people they care for – and this doesn’t just refer to martyrdom or other grand sacrifices. Providing for those who have less,

or physically doing for others, is also a sacrifice. The giving of goods and services is a transfer of wealth and energy for no measurable benefit. Something as simple as putting candy wrappers in garbage cans is a sacrifice for the benefit of others. It would be easier just to drop them on the ground and walk away.

Caring for people other than ourselves is beneficial and we have learned to accept and recognize the value of these actions, no matter how great or small the effort. At the other end of the spectrum, caring for your self to the detriment of others is recognized as wrong and we understand how, if everyone put them selves above all others, our society would disintegrate and cease to exist. Whether evil embodies something as simple as dropping those candy wrappers on the ground or, at its highest level, causing the death of others to promote your personal pleasure; it all grows from the same ideal – the value we place on ourselves in relation to our fellow human beings.

One of the vilest (Is that a word?) or most frightening classifications we can put on another human being is psychopath, which is a personality disorder commonly manifested by an inability to empathize – to walk a mile in another person’s shoes. It disturbs us because we generally rely on the idea that everyone empathizes with their fellow human beings and, therefore, everyone wishes to respond to the needs of others. We want to believe that we give more than we get and if someone suggests to us this isn’t true, and we are takers at a cost to others, we are offended. Our lives are measured through our importance to the rest of society and this is often dependent of our ability, and willingness, to contribute; whether that contribution is in time, talent, skills, or money, it makes up a large part of how we are valued by others and, ultimately, by ourselves.

Unfortunately, confusion arises when we try to redefine good and evil to suit our personal agendas. When an individual attempts to place “sacrificing the welfare of others for our own benefit” in the “good” column, this causes a problem and makes the world a much more bewildering place. There may be “a sucker born every minute”, and the law may read “let the buyer beware”, and it is possible “they would do the same thing to us”, but to accept these pronouncements as justification for benefits derived from the pain of others, doesn’t move the goalposts. It is still evil.

On the other hand, our governing organizations and institutions have a long history of subverting these concepts and we have a history of acquiescence to, and even support for, their efforts. For instance, policies of bigotry and racism were justified by classifying others as non-people or sub-people and, therefore, not worthy of the concern we give our own people. This allowed us to create societies supported by a slave or near-slave culture and reap the economic benefits earned from their efforts. During the Second World War, it also allowed my country to imprison Canadian men, women, and children – and impound and sell all their possessions, simply because they had a Japanese heritage. Given the circumstance of a worldwide population, which up until recent decades embraced the notion of racial superiority, it was not a hard sell. (Indeed, in some present-day societies, caste systems and “ethnic cleansing” are still in evidence.)

Academics continue to teach this economically motivated aspect of racism although a genetically coded ethnocentrism component has been added to the mix in recent times, more specifically, the possibility exists we are born with a “me and mine first” gene which makes sacrificing “them and theirs” less bothersome. Whatever the excuse, not long ago, institutionalized racism and bigotry were powerful tools providing huge economic benefits for those capable of enforcing the advantage. And literally millions, maybe even billions, of people saw nothing wrong with this. Does this mean the whole world was evil... perhaps?

Presently, thanks to the worldwide human rights movement, the majority of us understand that to abuse others simply because a particular government designated them as having less value, becomes a denial of all human society. Any attempt to abuse select groups is a retreat into pre-civilized tribalism and a rejection of the mutual trust necessary to live in a modern global society. We have also learned, the hard way, that memories are long and revenge is a powerful force. Brutal retaliation even decades later, may arise from such Stone Age beliefs. Of course, we now live in a world where advanced weapons technologies are becoming so widely available such vengeance can cause havoc out of all proportion to the initial crime.

Human society can no longer afford to marginalize or ignore anyone. In a world this crowded the level of trust we can create is what will deter-

mine whether life is worth living. It is what will allow us to form social relationships and be free and mobile enough to find new opportunities for maintaining and expanding those relationships. Without trust we will live in a state of constant fear, like animals in the woods, sleeping with one eye open and jumping at every sound. Of course, in many parts of the world people already live like this.

To achieve trust, we need to be valued as “good” people – people who are capable of sacrificing for others on a large scale. Examining our development of these concepts, we find that at the heart of good, or altruism, (to use the scientific nomenclature), is the family. As I alluded to earlier, we have an incredibly strong genetic predisposition impelling us to protect and provide for members of our immediately family – even if it includes total self-sacrifice.

This predisposition predates humanity. To some extent it exists in all higher life forms with, for example, a warning call being a very common reaction to approaching danger throughout a variety of species. The animal giving the warning call draws attention to themselves but gives other members of their species the opportunity to hide or escape. In the primate classes, it is very evident. When predators surprise a primate group, adult males routinely place themselves in harms way to give the females and young time to get to safety. Even the strongest chimp or baboon has little chance of surviving an encounter with their arch-enemy the leopard, but it doesn’t stop them from leaping out to fight if group members are in mortal danger. This is common in human societies as well, and examples exist in every community. A few years ago, in my corner of the world a woman fought a cougar with nothing but her bare hands because it was stalking her children. She died as a result.

Evolutionary biologists have coined the term “inclusive fitness” which suggests that we have a genetic desire to help those who appear to be like us and the closer they are to sharing our DNA the more likely we will show concern for their welfare. As family connections get more distant we are less likely to commit ourselves to martyrdom but the tendency to sacrifice remains, although weakening, in an ever-expanding circle moving from close family to distant family to people who share physical traits with us. Spiraling outward beyond that, people who we know or who we share common values and interests with, or who have

similar lifestyles and cultures, can be deemed by us as worthy of our protective instincts.

This is one reason why governments may be so successful at developing a sense of family within a nation. They have learned that promoting a Motherland or Fatherland or Good Old Uncle Sam contributes to a bonding process which helps rally support when facing threats from the “outside” world. Many national and cultural leaders hold tight to the old “us” and “them” delineations and continue to incite us to greater levels of patriotism, often for their own selfish political reasons. I guess by my definition that would make them evil.

The politics of “us” and “them” was a necessary pillar in every government’s platform for many hundreds of years. It was a harsh and brutal world where differentiating between good and evil only applied within your borders. Beyond was “them” and they had the potential to be either your lord or your servant; depending who was more adept at the art of war. In other words, once past your borders people were evil by definition. Over many generations as populations grew and travel between nations became easier, followed by widespread education and improvements to communication, we began learning more about our similarities than our differences.

Since the advent of mass media, the world has been moving closer together. At the present time when disasters hit other parts of the world most countries have aid services, which react and send help to those who are suffering – paid for by people who may never have set foot in those countries.

Among the general population the “us” and “them” divide is weakening. The way we apply good and evil at home is spreading across the world as we begin to recognize good in the people of other nations and become angry when evil is perpetrated on anyone anywhere. As a species, our best hope for a peaceful and satisfying future lies in this taking place before various hate groups can acquire destructive technologies, like nuclear weapons, and use them to fortify the “us” and “them” divisions for more generations to come.

One intervening difficulty painting shades of grey on a black and white argument is the concept of solipsism. This great befuddlement

of good and evil theorizes that the “self” is the only reality, suggesting that everything we do in life is for ourselves, even when we do something for others, because doing for others makes us feel good about ourselves. There is some truth in this idea, which is what confounds us and leads us to question motives, but not all is lost to innate selfishness. Some sacrifices are so obviously costly to the welfare of those making them they must be an altruistic act. However, even if only a few people could explain solipsism if stopped on the street and asked, many look for it when seeing acts of kindness.

We seem to question “what’s in it for them”, with the suspicion that a possible hidden offsetting benefit might accrue from someone’s unselfish action. Or, perhaps, that their good deeds are propelled by guilt from unearned benefits or evil actions in the past. As much as our society relies on trust and altruism from each of us, our rational benefit side looks for practical gains that can be garnered from those actions. Delineating which actions are pure altruism and which are rational solipsism is one mystery society may never solve because, like so many mysteries, we can’t, as yet, peer into individual hearts and minds and determine the motivating factors.

One thing we do know conclusively about both good and evil is that they are highly impacted by example. For instance, tests have been done where motorists driving along a busy highway would witness another motorist in trouble and being helped by a passing vehicle. A few miles farther along, another vehicle would appear to be in trouble and it was found that the motorists who witnessed aid being given at the previous site are more likely to stop and offer help. Good begets good. We react positively to seeing those needing help receive it, and we respond by copying. Unfortunately, also, evil begets evil. If the motorist on the side of the road isn’t getting any help we are more likely to drive by the next one as well, which leaves me to wonder if altruism is as much about personal leadership as it is about caring. In which case, it rests with each of us to provide an example for all.

Chapter 11

Truth, Reality and Language

Reality is not truth and truth is not reality. That may sound weird but think about reality TV shows; how real are you with a camera in your face, and how much truth exists in that reality? Truth is “what is”; reality is “what is, from your perspective”. Truth is discovered, reality is created.

Truth is a lofty goal, perhaps unattainable in anything but bits and pieces... but it's worth searching for. It's what science pursues, mostly in an effort to better explain and simplify our lives.

Reality, on the other hand, is changeable; something we construct based on popular consensus. Is evolution real? Is God? Which God, yours or mine? Are ghosts real? Is there a Bermuda Triangle or Bigfoot or Loch Ness Monster? (Be kind, Urquhart castle in on Loch Ness... Nessie may be a relative.) Everyone has an opinion and it's real to them so we accept and tolerate a range of realities. What we don't tolerate is a range of truths (except maybe in quantum theory, which could screw up everything – or explain it). Truth may be the ultimate reality but until that wondrous day when it indisputably presents itself, we remain entirely capable of adopting our favorite reality and defending it against all others.

Sensibly, most of us leave wiggle room in our personal realities because, whether we have adopted the best reality, or not, may be worth a passionate argument, but it's seldom worth sacrificing our lives over. Life hits us between the eyes every minute of every day regardless of how we view it – and life demands flexibility.

Each and every one of us uses our unique and personal perspective to

organize and govern our actions. Our individual perspective is the result of every piece of knowledge and every experience that gets filtered through, and altered by, every other piece of knowledge, and every past experience stored in our memories. No two people ever live the exact same lives, so no two identical realities exist. Still, in spite of this, we are highly social animals who successfully depend on a multitude of others for our day-to-day existence; none of whom will completely share our point of view. Obviously, the fine details of individual reality are not important. To put it more succinctly, how you think isn't as important as how you act.

We all share common basic needs: breathable air, clean food and water, shelter from the weather and, on the mental health side, positive relationships with others – and maybe the odd genetic imperative, such as a drive to perpetuate the species. Satisfying these shared needs requires co-operation. We need to interact with a variety of individuals and negotiate points of agreement and compromise.

As well, variations in our realities actually make our species stronger by making us better prepared for unexpected events. If a sea monster rises from the Atlantic and attacks New York, somebody has probably been preparing for that.

There is a play on words (that makes me cringe but at least one idiot in every crowd brings it up) which says, to “assume” is to make an “ass” out of “u” and “me”. I disagree; in fact, I believe that if you can't make assumptions, and depend on them, the stress of everyday life will take a severe toll. When my future wife and I first got together some (ohmygod!) fifty plus years ago. We had this argument because she felt, like many women of the time, that it was wrong for a man to take his relationship “for granted” and I, ever practical, thought the whole idea of a long-term commitment was about exactly that. Who wants an unpredictable marriage? I don't think we ever did finish the argument but something obviously stuck. Still, I believe the degree to which we can rely on our assumptions may be a measure of how successful we've been at building relationships and, ultimately, relationships are what life is all about.

While your reality may not be my reality finding common ground does add stability and substance to our lives. Just watch two people who

meet for the first time. They start a conversation by talking about externals, “Nice weather,” and they move on to jobs or neighborhoods or politics or recent movies, and from there it goes to families or schools or anything else that might be a little more revealing – always unwrapping themselves slowly until they get closer to their core reality; seeing if they can share a level of understanding, a connection with each other. The point is to arrive at a comfort level, a predictability level, ultimately, a level of trust... friendship.

One serious byproduct of living in the midst of multiple personal realities and little objective truth, means it also becomes easier to accept fantasy as a significant part of our lives. If reality is a matter of perspective it follows that fantasy can become part of our reality.

John Wayne is one of the great American heroes yet his heroics are a fantasy. They took place in movies. When he had an opportunity to get into the Second World War, and be a hero for real, he accepted an exemption keeping him out of the conflict, and he spent the war staring in movies. No effort was made to hide this but he remains an international hero, a role model for a whole generation. Is Harry Potter real? If not then why did we line up for hours to find out what’s going on in his life? Look at a billboard, read a magazine, turn on the television, trillions of dollars are spent every year feeding our fantasies, integrating them with our reality. Is this a problem? That depends on whether we can still focus on the challenges that arise from everyday living. In other words, on our grasp of reality... can we keep our fantasies from distorting the balance we need to function in a highly complex social environment?

Communication

Eight billion distinct perspectives now inhabit this planet – eight billion different realities – and each of us pays homage to, and is defined by, our families, nations, social, religious, and political ideologies as well as to a personal vision of ourselves. The question for the future is, how do we incorporate all of these viewpoints, along with their competing demands, into one cohesive and cooperative world reality?

The first step is to investigate and promote whatever shared ideals and viewpoints we already hold. Unfortunately, here we encounter the

“great divider” – the number one difficulty in working toward a common policy of survival for humanity – and that is communication. Every relationship, every interaction with another human being, is based on communication and, beyond some primitive body language, words are the only medium we have, and they have proven to be so fuzzy and inexact that detailed and sincere communications among the peoples of this planet are virtually non-existent.

Simply cataloguing the number of languages is formidable, let alone their dialects, but even within the same language, the same dialect, indeed, the same household, words can mean different things to different people... just through context. Perhaps all serious communication should be run through a universal translation computer? I’m being facetious here, but only a little.

Take, for instance, a basic statement like, “The sun comes up in the morning.” Does that make sense? Technically, no, because morning is defined as a time when the sun comes up so you are actually saying “The sun comes up when the sun comes up”. It’s a redundancy, and untrue as well. The sun doesn’t come up. It appears over the horizon as your position on the Earth rotates toward it. But we still say “the sun comes up in the morning” and the great majority of people know what we are talking about. The reality of communication is language, and language is complex, changeable and, like all common realities, arrived at through a process of mutual agreement. In spite of rationality and science, if we all agree that the sun comes up in the morning and goes down in the evening that is what is real.

The limitations and confusions in language create many of the conflicts in our society. If you can’t articulate a problem, or possible solution, in such a way that a trustworthy connection is established; a level of sincerity created; than frustration and emotion may overcome sensibilities, creating conflicts where none is needed. You can’t just say to people, “We we are all brothers and sisters!” when the only way you can talk is as a stranger.

Eight billion individual and diverse realities, hundreds, perhaps thousands of languages, and even if we all spoke the same language there would still remain tremendous difficulties in communicating even the most basic information about ourselves. Without a way to overcome

these impediments we will never enjoy a clear understanding of each other, and because understanding leads to predictability, we will never be able to predict each other's actions. Unpredictable relationships are rife with distrust and suspicion, always on the brink of failure, and failure in a relationship between highly technological societies has the potential to lead to problems for every individual within that society.

What I am trying to say, with apparent great difficulty, is that we can't talk about coming together, forming global relationships, and accepting each other's realities, unless we all share an understanding of a the basic, universal, concepts that guide our actions. What is your personal vision of freedom, democracy, equality, and leadership? What role should history, religion, and free will play in our decision-making? As a human society, we must be able to discuss and debate these issues on a worldwide stage that every individual can relate to. If we are searching for global co-operation – and we must – those questions need answers. In a search for truth, and a reality we can all share, focusing on communication has to be the place where we start.

Chapter 12

Time

Time is fixed, unstoppable, uncontrollable, moving in a forward linear march until, as the poet's say, the end of time. Einstein, in his spectacular genius, lobbed a hand grenade into such simplicity by proposing that time may not be linear. There could be folds in the fabric of time and someday we may be able to leap from one fold to another... but so far this is just mind-altering speculation. What we know unquestionably is that how we perceive time isn't linear.

“Eons ago” means nothing to me. Looking far back in time is like standing between the rails of a train track and looking off to the horizon. The tracks converge into one tiny little spec in the distance. It's like a reverse Doppler shift where the farther time is away from you the more compressed it becomes, and the closer it gets the longer it stretches out. A billion years, a million years, a hundred thousand years, ten thousand years – it's all the same because I can't picture any difference and, at the ultimate level, light years only exist as a purely mathematical configuration in my imagination. Huge numbers in relation to time are simply beyond my conception.

I do understand that a long time ago people who looked just like me took up stone tools to improve their lives, creating evolutionary distance between themselves and the other animals they competed with for food and shelter. The Stone Age lasted for two and a half million years, then a Bronze Age for two thousand years, followed by an Iron Age that began over three thousand years ago... there are those are big numbers again.

My grandfather was a young lad when the Wright brothers lifted off the

beach at Kitty Hawk and sailed into the sky for the first powered flight – a flimsy cloth, wood, and wire contraption that floated aloft for a few seconds and created a world-wide phenomenon. He remembered the fuss it caused in his tiny little part of the world. Sixty-five years later he sat in front of a television and watched “live” as Neil Armstrong stepped onto the Moon.

I remember when television came to my neighborhood and, finally, to my parent’s house. Big vacuum tubes and a black and white picture proved magical... and addictive. Then transistors arrived and brought scratchy little AM radios you could carry in your pocket, but a few years later the silicone chip revolutionized even that, quickly followed by complex imprinted circuitry. The first computer I ever used required me to wait almost an hour in a lineup just to drop a stack of punch cards in. It filled a large room but there was another even larger room next door to hold all the punch card data entry machines needed to build our programs.

Then personal computers came on the market and it was so maddening to buy one knowing that, literally, before you got it home it was obsolete. The changes were happening so fast that within a few months it wouldn’t run the newest software. If you got three years out of a computer it meant you fell way behind in your capability to compete with the people buying a new one every year.

Now the world is digitized. Everything you see or hear can be reduced to a computer code – a mile long string of one’s and zero’s which creates an entire new world of infinite variability, limited only by human imagination – and our grasp of the technology – and all of this is happening in the span of a single lifetime.

Is time still going at the same speed? We accept and adapt to these changes. In fact, the innovators who create all of these marvels say their creations are consumer driven. We demand and they supply, but they can’t keep up with our insatiable desire for new products. Where is it going and what is driving this ever-increasing need for new ideas and novel consumer products? Are we seeking some form of perfect knowledge or ultimate lifestyle or endless entertainment or, perhaps, are we victims of supply side economics? The innovators produce a new concept and sell it to us as a lifestyle necessity. Do we really need a

digital potato peeler or a car that tells us we aren't taking the best route to the grocery store? Have we moved so fast we've lost control of our ability to make these decisions?

Did humankind take that psyche shattering trip to the Moon as a means of furthering the goals of science – or because it was politically important for the United States to show how Russian technology was inferior? The US won the argument and presently there is a huge and hungry infrastructure centered on space exploration, which may or may not be a high priority to us as individuals. On the other hand, we now have satellites which give us a fabulous selection of clear television pictures, beautiful sounding radio, exact global positioning, world wide telephone communication and, with the appropriate receiver technology, it can all be had from anywhere on the face of Planet Earth. The potential benefits in global understanding are immeasurable.

It's all very exciting and beyond overwhelming. Physically I'm that same guy smashing large animal bones with stone tools to extract the rich marrow, but there exists an incredible world inside my head now. I've seen the past and present, in close-up with slow motion replay, and expert commentary. I've watched a panorama of predicted futures in vibrant, surreal, colors complete with crisp digitally enhanced sound, and these same sounds and images are available to anyone from the top of the highest mountain to the floor of the deepest valley with no more than a phone carried in your pocket.

How much more can we take? Are there limits on our ability to accept change? What effect is this magnitude of change having on us? How much can we adapt before we lose our sense of nationality, or community, or identity? Or are these concepts even worth preserving?

Look at what is happening to our governing institutions... how far behind can they get before they become irrelevant and meaningless. File suit against Bill Gates' Microsoft for commandeering an industry and by the time it comes to "justice" the industry has changed so much it becomes a moot point. Recognize problems on the internet and by the time you write and pass laws to bring about change the internet has moved to whole new concepts; identity theft, passwords, encryptions, cyber crime, web cams, how are they changing us, besides increasing cultural evolution to light speed.

I live in a soup of radio waves now. Does that impact my health? I don't know but I'd like to. I may have gained a far wider knowledge of the world than I used to have, but I've also gained a much greater understanding of how little I can do to change anything in it. I've heard it said that knowledge and understanding bring peace of mind, yet, many of the new truths I've learned I find disturbing. Am I gaining ground, moving ahead, winning the game – what is the game – or, more importantly, will I ever know before time runs out?

Geneticists have discovered that death is a natural form of planned obsolescence. Once we have contributed our genes to the mix, hopefully for the betterment of human society, and raised our offspring to where they can function on their own, we are programmed to dissolve in our own juices to make room for the next generation. It's Mother Nature's method of saying, "Get out of the way and let the future shift to the next level." Now science is on the hunt for these obsolescence genes to isolate and alter their programming. One day the degenerative process called aging just won't happen. Each of us will freeze in time. How will the world look if you are thirty years old forever... and I mean forever? It won't be long before we are offered this option. Diseases, accidents and misadventures, could still claim lives but it wouldn't be a predictable or natural death. How will this change the way human society views itself?

Everything in this world is defined by how it relates to us because we have dominated the Earth – and given ourselves the power to make our definitions reality. So, what happens when we radically change ourselves, when who we are is not part of the life cycle but a continuing entity, on into time? How will we feel being on the outside of time... looking in? Do you think that time will finally slow down?

Section Three:

Spiritual Adventures, A Distraction

Is there anyone who truly knows where religion should fit in our lives? Each of us has an opinion but little of it is based on research, perhaps because few relevant facts exist to research. Science can't provide the answer because science can only confirm knowledge while religion focuses on the lack of it. Spirituality is anti-science but that doesn't make it irrelevant or wrong. It's just up to us to decide where it fits.

Chapter 13

The Meaning of Life

Some subjects have become so clichéd and goofy that, perhaps, the only way we can discuss them is by being just as goofy. Given that, we might as well get this “Meaning of Life” thing out of the way. It has become a preoccupation with my generation, (boomers), especially those on the wealthy and listless end of the spectrum. Unfortunately, with so many involved in this latest “Grail Quest” it has turned into a running joke for a variety of professional commentators, as in late night comics, cartoonists (guru on the mountain) and, last but not least, jaded social scientists (like me). The bargain basement humor dished out by the above derives from the obvious futility of looking for something that’s either a fool’s errand or, if it isn’t, is so obvious as to be not worth the effort.

Of course, this hasn’t deterred an entire industry from gushing forth to promote a variety of paths, usually spiritual, toward achieving the desired result. Most involve the teachings of various swamis, gurus, shaman, or ancient religious scholars (preferably from the mysterious east) to help us in pursuit of the ultimate goal, which is, apparently, finding “inner peace through enlightenment”. Indeed, if you’ve got a few bucks in your jeans you can attend select gatherings with these holy people while spending time at monasteries, ashrams, or back to nature retreats where you are taught to meditate, fast, and primal scream at each other. And no doubt you will emerge feeling peaceful and enlightened, even if still somewhat confused about what the meaning of life is.

Well, if your voyage has run aground and you see nothing but ignorance on the horizon, you need go no farther. I am here to answer that

age old question. Life does have meaning and I am about to impart to you this secret of the ages – get ready, here it comes – drum roll please – the meaning of life is... sex, intercourse, getting it on, the horizontal mambo, or whatever your favorite terminology is. I'm not joking. We are living creatures that have existed in one form or another since the primordial soup. Evolution has brought us to our present incarnation and the reason we got here is because we are ardent and successful procreators (a less than ideal word choice but it reads better than the more popular alternatives). In fact, we are the offspring of millions of years of ardent procreators.

As science informs us, (ad nauseam), a species survives because it has a large and varied population of ardent procreators which prepares them for whatever changes are occurring in their environment. It's a bit more complicated than that with minor mutations in each generation creating variability throughout the species, and natural selection choosing members of the species whose variations are best able to help them survive, and prosper, in a changing landscape. But if they lack a strong desire to procreate their special variation is dead in its tracks. We have done that. Arguably, as the dominant species on Earth, we have done that better than all other species since day one. We are the best procreators ever.

Now you know why every time you turn around procreation is staring you right between the eyes. It is used to sell every product, every activity... it understates or is blatant in everything we read, or watch, or talk about, music, dance, literature, television, movies, gossip, even the news. Why else should we have to endure night after night of lurid details when some beautiful young woman (usually white and blond) is kidnapped or raped or murdered. Far greater tragedies are taking place every moment of every day and we don't hear of them because they aren't sexy. Why do you think the good guy always has to get the good girl in the movie? If that evil, ugly, little, gnome got to leap on the blond virgin it would revolt us to the bottom of our chromosomes. Why do you think trillions of dollars are spent every year on our personal appearance? Why is what car we drive, or what neighborhood we live in, or what money we make, or who our family is, so important – sex appeal. It is the world's largest consumer product... by far. We are absorbed by procreation. And why not, that is how we got here, and that is how the next generation will get here.

There are flies in the ointment. Occasionally cultures attempt to hide this particular aspect of our animal nature. When I was young sex was dirty and we weren't allowed to see it, read it, or even talk about it. Sex was bad, except for married couples making babies, and even that wasn't to be enjoyed. How sinful. Victorian morality, cultures outlawing hormonal drives, nurture condemning nature; it was a dark age and I'm glad it faded while I could still get in on the good stuff. But Victorian morality was just a blip on the screen compared to what we are dealing with now.

Sex has been the meaning of life from the beginning of time until... until I was born, or, more specifically, until my parent's generation and my generation combined to change the world, making it far less predictable and safe. Now there are more people on Earth than the Earth can support, at least in the lifestyle we want it to support, (I hope you read my "Overpopulation" chapter) so the meaning of life is changing and cultural imperatives are providing so many new meanings that we are adrift, confused, stupefied (to borrow from Harry Potter).

In the good old days achieving success in life was about producing children and seeing them grow and prosper – and eventually produce children of their own. Now we are required to accomplish something else. In fact, the children you produce may actually be contributing to a problem. I'll bet you don't want to hear that. So, what now? What is becoming the new meaning of life?

I know the answer, again, (I'm a know-it-all – but my wife still puts up with me) so here goes... the new meaning of life is – another drum roll please – whatever you want it to be – ta daaa! Sounds weak, I know, but it works. In our highly sophisticated, technological world you now have the ability, and freedom, to create a comprehensive individual reality. You can decide on – or invent – your own truths, and build them into your personal environment. Whether your particular truth, and the environment you create to support it, exists within four walls, a computer hard drive, or a chemical formulation, it is your choice and, furthermore, you have the ability to overlay this special reality onto the entire world and make it as real and as much a part of your life as you need it to be. With relatively few resources you can totally submerge yourself in this constructed reality and virtually shut out all competing realities.

Everyone does this already on a small scale and always has. Fantasy is a part of everyone's life; the Walter Mitty in us is alive and well. However, new technologies are magnifying the scale. The ability for each of us to seek out and fulfill our personal needs within that fantasy is growing. And it's happening at the same time as our attachment to family and community is weakening. Never has life been more impersonal and anonymous. Every day you are constantly being reminded how few people you really know, and who really know you. Do you seek out a community to be part of, or create one? It is now your choice. Why go to all the effort and vulnerability of finding a love-of-your-life partner to sacrifice for and create and raise children with in a world that doesn't need more children? Why not just find someone you can enjoy having sex with who has a compatible fantasy or, at least, one that doesn't conflict with yours? Look around, the answer may be closer than you think. It's not a new idea.

If you question my sincerity in believing the meaning of life to be, "whatever you want it to be", you would be wrong. It is not a facetious way of saying that life really has no meaning. Even if I believe we have evolved to a point precariously close to habitat saturation life still has value, perhaps more so than at any other time in our existence. New technologies have raised the learning curve and given us more knowledge, a greater understanding, and a vision of the infinite diversity – limited only by our imagination – that encompasses the human condition. From this we have learned to see the potential for joy and satisfaction inherent in every human being. Life has never been more precious.

Having and raising babies may have been what we were created and designed to do, by evolution, but we have evolved beyond the bounds of evolution. We have reached a state where we can feed and nurture our imaginations, and construct realities that satisfy individual needs however sublime or driven. We still can't ignore each other. We remain intimately connected because threats always exist, at every level of society, which require co-operative action to overcome.

Still, who is so all knowing that they can sit in judgment over a life lived within itself, and say that it has no meaning. Think of the freedom gained in such a life. The only bounds are within your ability to nurture your creativity. If you are truly looking to find something meaning-

less or selfish, check out the people who understand this situation and continue to encourage child production as a means of promoting their religion, or skin color, or cultural identity. They are by far the greater threat to a secure and successful life for future generations.

Chapter 14

Hallelujah

Religion must be viewed as one of the greatest instigators of brutality and pain in the history of our species. I know it's impossible but if we somehow could add up all of the hurt it has caused on one side, and all of the benefits on the other, it would be interesting to see the balance. The fact that most of the benefits are supposed to arrive in the "next life" makes that measurement virtually impossible, (and if you believe this is purely coincidental there is this guy named Bernie Madoff who wants to sell you shares in a wonderful investment scheme.)

Over the ages, religion has been a primary tender spot in our psyche because the deal is, if we become a believer, it promises to extend our identities to the end of time... and who doesn't want to live forever or, at least, to a point of our own choosing?

I was brought up in a Christian environment but not one that was devout and I quickly came to understand that for many "Sunday Christians", like me, membership in an established church is of secondary concern – most of the time. You always have to maintain, in some back corner of you're mind, that this is where we go during both the saddest and the most joyous occasions in our lives, and tampering with its fundamental truths could prove a scary proposition. If you disagree, and believe yourself open to opposing ideas, or immune to criticism of your mother church, see if you don't twitch a little while I scribble a thumbnail sketch of some new, and not so new, research on the myths of Christianity.

More and more publications are appearing based on translations of the Nag Hammadi and Dead Sea scrolls, which are a written record of

Biblical times, often by people who witnessed them. As well, popular works by authors such as Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln whom I borrow from profusely with great gratitude, (and which formed the basis for Dan Brown's bestselling "The Da Vinci Code"), have brought to light long suppressed truths surrounding the events leading to how our religion was shaped. It is amazing how far we have drifted, or been pushed, away from the realities of Jesus himself.

Christianity, as everyone knows, comes from the root word Christ, referring to Jesus Christ, the son of God, who was born to the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem, Judea, approximately 2000 years ago. One popular belief has it that our calendar corresponds with his birth, and December 25th of any given year depicts how old he would have been if he was still alive. Actually, by our dates, he was born in 7 BC and from that calculation 1993 was his 2000th birthday, but that is wrong too because December 25th isn't his birthday. We are not quite sure on which day he was born but January 6th was celebrated as his birthday for the first three hundred years after his death. In the fourth century the Roman Emperor Constantine who, at the time, had also taken over as Pope (thus, the name, Roman Catholic Church), moved Christ's official birthday from January 6th to December 25th to coincide with the festival of *Natalis Invictus*. It is the festival in honor of *Sol Invictus*, the sun god. Having two major festivals only a few weeks apart was inconvenient for the empire, and Constantine apparently favored *Sol Invictus* so he adjusted Christ's birthday, (Merry Christmas to you too).

Another awkward situation was the Sabbath. The Christian Sabbath was Saturday and the Sun God's was Sunday, (of course), so a large part of the population were shut down for two days of the week. In the year 321 this same very practical Emperor decided that the Christian holy day should also be moved to Sunday thereby scrapping the 4th Commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." (Exodus 20:8 - 11)

It didn't seem to be a problem that Jesus and his Disciples observed Saturday as their holy day, being both Pope and Emperor gave Constantine a certain leeway, even to change the Ten Commandments – and he wasn't finished. In a further effort to combine Christianity and sun worship, Constantine also arranged for the bright light that formed the head of the sun god to be shifted over onto figures of Christ, thereby

creating the Christian halo effect, which is still part of our vision of Jesus. Constantine believed that consolidating the major religions into one entity was an effective political strategy and he worked diligently at it, but he wasn't all about politics. Jesus was voted into Godhood at the Council of Nicaea in 325, with Constantine presiding. However, at the same time Emperor Constantine was voted as a better and more effective Messiah than Jesus. I suppose it's pretty hard to be an emperor and not an egomaniac. After he died the church was able to quietly ignore the second aspect of that vote.

Stepping backward to the time of Jesus of Nazareth it should be noted that Nazareth didn't exist. It came into being a couple hundred years later. The confusion probably came from the mistranslation of Jesus of the Nazarene, describing the particular Judaic sect he was brought up in. Jesus, by the way, is actually the Greek translation of his name. What people called him, and how he referred to himself, was Yeshua, which in English we translate as Joshua, and "Christ" was a hereditary title handed down to every Jewish king from the House of David. Jesus was a direct descendant of David (remember David and Goliath). His father Joseph was the son of Heli who was a direct descendent of Nathan, one of King David's younger sons, this being the main reason Jesus posed a threat to the Romans who had conquered and occupied Judea. To many Jews, Jesus was Jewish royalty and represented a rallying point where they could organize their resistance to the Roman occupation – and he did much to encourage this view.

Jesus was brought up in a privileged environment, well educated, and properly schooled in the craft of being a leader. He was considered very intelligent, witty, and a gifted speaker. For what it is worth, he was born in a manger but not quite as the story goes. All women of his religious faith had to leave home to deliver their babies, the same as they had to leave when menstruating. It was considered unclean to do either in the home. As a result, each community had a building some distance away where women could go, and the one Mary went to was called the Manger.

Jesus apparently was a revolutionary not only in his desire to see his people freed from occupation but in a larger sense as well. When he was born he was widely considered to be illegitimate. If Nazarenes wished to marry they first had to undergo a betrothal ceremony fol-

lowed by a substantial waiting period before the wedding. Joseph and Mary didn't quite make it through their rigidly applied period of betrothal and Mary conceived before the scheduled wedding. This scandal tainted Jesus in such a way that certain powerful religious leaders later suggested his claim to the throne should be forfeit to his younger brother. Whether for this particular reason, or for a host of others, Jesus developed strong personal beliefs that were contrary to many within his religion and community – and he used his position as a hereditary leader to promote these beliefs.

He became well known for taking the side of the underdog and standing up for the weak and poor, and he promoted his idea that Gentiles should be allowed full status, equal with those who were Jewish by birth, if they accepted Judaism. At this time, various levels of Judaism were enforced depending on family background and tribe of origin. The conflict eventually grew so bitter that he and his followers split from their established sect and formed their own sect of Judaism... what we now define as Christianity.

At this time in history numerous religions existed and competed for legitimacy. Jesus evidently had a knack for finding and motivating devoted followers for his sect. Peter and Paul also became legendary in their ability to find new recruits and they did this not simply with their passion but also with their imagination. They were very adept at repackaging Jesus' life, particularly the crucifixion, and other momentous events, in such a way that Christianity became broadly appealing. For instance, when Jesus was still trying to reform the Nazarene sect, he took part in a baptismal service of both Jews and gentiles... as the priest. This was against the rules because he was not from the Tribe of Levi or descended from Aaron, where all priests must originate.

To take part in this service the persons being baptized had to wade into the Dead Sea and observe a ceremony where the priest blessed them, and because the priest had to dress in the traditional heavy robes of his office he was allowed to walk out over the water along a narrow jetty built especially for this service. It was referred to as "walking on water". The extraordinary event in the original story was Jesus acting the part of priest and, thus, proclaiming that any devoted member of this sect should be allowed to become a priest. As we are all undoubtedly aware, the story was later altered to become the miracle of Jesus

walking on water.

Another valuable technique in gathering followers for your religion was to borrow ideas from the competition. One virtual requirement in this process was that your holy guy must have been born from a God and a Virgin. The Greeks, the Romans, all the neighboring countries, had gods who fit that mold – Adonis, Attis, Dionysos, Tammuz, and Zoroaster to name a few. So, poor Joseph had to take one for the team and Mary got a celestial lover. (It also helped explain away the early pregnancy.) Tammuz, by the way, died with a wound in his side and rose from his tomb three days later. He even had a rock rolled aside at the entrance to his tomb. Mithraism also proved a fertile ground for the Christian founders. An apocalypse, a day of judgment, a resurrection of the flesh and a second coming, were big tenets of Mithraism. The Mithraic communion might sound a little familiar as well “He who shall not eat of my body nor drink of my blood so that he may be one with me and I with him, shall not be saved”.

It is hard to keep a straight face when writing this because as far as I had wandered from my roots in this religion I still feel like a fool when I read it. Five hundred years ago Pope Leo X is quoted as saying “It has served us well, this myth of Christ”, but I don’t think it has served anyone quite as well as it served church leaders. For two thousand years we believed the dogma of Christianity. Brutal crusades, wars, vicious inquisitions, tight controls on learning, the suppression of women’s rights – and it still goes on today to a lesser extent. It was just a few years ago the Irish were killing each other over which sect of Christianity better smoothed your way into heaven.

Why can’t we see the silliness of it? Is it the black and white alternatives offered by religion? If we are good little sheep, when we die we rise into Heaven and sit on the right hand of God where, presumably, every wish is fulfilled for all eternity, (does that include sex?). And if we are bad little sheep we sink into Hell and burn in the non-consuming fire for all time. Let’s see, the decision comes down to a choice between eternal torture and every wish being fulfilled forever. Hmmm, even if you are just slightly doubtful I suppose your best bet is to follow the well-trodden path, particularly when the weight of your culture and community are pushing you in that direction.

Strangely, I still believe there is a place for a church like organization in our society. They do a lot of important charity work and provide a much-needed structure for fellowship in each community, and worldwide. I also believe in a spiritual presence and the need to express our personal spirituality. And I believe everyone feels a desire to leave a legacy, something lasting beyond their lives, whether that includes an immortal spirit... well, your guess is as good as mine. I hope it does, for purely selfish reasons.

The original Christians, including Christ himself, were special people who put their lives on the line to bring more freedom to others. The message they preached was “we are all equal in the eyes of God”, and this was a revolutionary message. It was a time of deep social divisions and telling everyone they are equal, regardless of how poor or where you came from, is what brought many people to the church.

Even though that message became a fixture of Christian doctrine it was never more than window dressing for the seceding Christian leaders who quickly set about putting their own spin on the rules. The Christian Church was never designed to serve the people. It was designed to control the people – to restrict freedoms and indenture its followers to the church. I doubt if other religions are very different or other extremely powerful organizations for that matter, but where open education and free speech is allowed the incredible power of the church fades into the shadows and the sooner it happens the better, for all of us.

I haven't called myself a Christian for a long time mostly because of the church's legacy; yet, I seem to need something more than a vague sense of spirituality in my life. Lately I've started to believe that maybe I can be a Yeshua Christian. His rhetoric and charisma have certainly held powerful sway in the world for the past two thousand years. His belief that we are all equal in the eyes of God makes him the ultimate father of the Equal Rights Movement, which, in my opinion, is our best hope for saving this poor planet. Perhaps believing in two-thousand-year-old ideals put forth by a very special man is enough to sustain a spiritual belief.

Chapter 15

God?

Religions come in many shapes and sizes but the vast majority revolve around one simple idea. God. He, (it's mostly a He), guides or controls our lives based on how devout, or subservient, or repentant we are, providing us with this incredible life in a world that He created. Using His infinite wisdom and absolute power He grows us into useful citizens so we can honor His creations and provide a lasting legacy to His greatness. It's much more complex than that, I know, but it seems every one you talk to has a differing opinion on who or what God is.

Is there really a God? It's a question we all ask at some time... perhaps many times, and how we answer impacts our lives. Recently, in my corner of the world, a rise in the prominence of atheism has put the question front and center in the form of billboards and on bus advertising. It seems atheists believe we would live a better life if we didn't have God to mess things up. I'm not so sure.

Both non-believers, as well as believers, seem fond of constructing highly detailed and logical arguments in support of their positions, which is simple enough to do considering the mountains of circumstantial evidence favoring both sides – and the even greater lack of factual proof needed to destroy either argument. Mind you, resting the foundation of your strongest arguments on a negative premise sets a precarious precedent.

Those who believe in God generally bring up how little we know about what created our universe and all of the impressively refined systems within it; the intelligent design theory. Basically, it states that only a God is smart and powerful enough to have done all of this and, besides,

something had to be here to create the universe. Our tiny little planet whose address is the middle of Nowhere, Milky Way, just couldn't have been conceived as an entire civilization in all its glorious complexity without a measure of help.

Science, of course, provides a competing theory based on fortuitous mixes of hot gases and primordial soups followed by billions of years of continuous adaption and differentiation all categorized under the umbrella of evolution. Atheists generally believe in evolution, although a few rely on fringe beliefs such as visitors from other planets taking a hand in our creation. But the majority of those denying God's existence use the argument of observable phenomena to state that, because we can't see, hear, taste, smell or feel God and, thus, provide real evidence of His existence, ipso facto, He must not exist. And they go on to state that we created God as a crutch, and it's time we grew up and began taking responsibility for our own decisions. Both pro God and anti God positions are strongly held and choosing sides seems more a function of upbringing than anything else but, ultimately, it is a personal, and in most cases, a quiet choice.

I do believe in God, for a variety of reasons, not all of which I fully understand or care to delve into. Yet, if you were to ask me if I believed in a God who sits around in white robes with a long flowing beard on a throne in Heaven while micro-managing our lives, I would say, "No". The God I choose to believe in is an amorphous, intelligent, and powerful presence, who possibly intervenes in our lives at, appropriate intervals, and I'm not sure where that idea developed, but it fits for me (and maybe no one else), and for what it's worth I'm a devout evolutionist, (you probably guessed that).

Because believing is so personal a choice I'm not adamant that God exists, although, admittedly, when I hear of people pushing God to promote their own well being it does annoy me greatly, which means I may be more invested than a pragmatist should. The established religions are the obvious "pushers". They all seem to take ownership and insert themselves between you and God, claiming special status as His intermediary, and subsequently making you jump through hoops or pay admission for time in His presence. Their God apparently has very difficult and selective rules, which the intermediaries are chosen to administer, and to punish you for breaching. Meanwhile, these same

intermediaries manage to achieve wealth, power and status while performing “Gods work”. It’s all a little too self-serving for my taste.

Atheism, on the other hand, troubles me for a completely different set of reasons. The adherents attempt to manipulate the concept of sensibility by stating that it is irrational to believe in God when, in my experience, one of the great attractions to a belief in God is its rationality. God represents a day of judgment and a legacy beyond human life – an afterlife – and this helps make sense of the world. To believe that everything in life is based on pure happenstance denies our need for justice and casts doubt on the value of hard work and discipline – and sacrificing for the benefit of others. There is a lot of evil in this world and it helps to believe that those who perpetrate and benefit from this evil will someday be punished. In truth, to accept that we live in a totally random world disturbs our core values.

One of the positive ideals that God represents is a reckoning, perhaps not now and not in this dimension but sometime, somewhere... it’s a tough idea to justify; I must admit I have trouble with this aspect more than any other, but it helps with day-to-day living to believe that, eventually, what goes around comes around. Without this belief, it’s hard to reinforce many of our better social behaviors.

What atheists call rational is, I suppose, scientific empiricism. Although they claim to use deductive and intellectual reasoning as their model, the scientific method approach they tout, is impractical when based on so little positive evidence. Life in the absence of reliable facts becomes as much art as science. Science provides very few answers to the “Big” questions. Why do we exist? Where did the universe come from? What was here before our universe? Why do men go bald? (Sorry, it’s a pet peeve.)

Because we don’t know the truth we end up looking for our answers within what works.

For a social scientist, the concept of rationalism includes a search for the “optimal”. Rational people are defined as optimizers who evaluate their decisions based on which choice provides the closest fit. Most people equate rational to outcomes that are practical, sensible, justifiable, and coherent, and a belief in God, and the afterlife, allows that.

We may be completely wrong but so may the theory of gravity. Either way, until science can prove God doesn't exist, or offer us the same peace of mind we gain from believing, it will be a difficult concept to abandon.

Perhaps the foremost practical aspect of believing in God and the afterlife is that it makes dying much easier. Everyone dies; in all the millions of years of human existence no one has ever escaped this reality. It is absolutely universal and totally frightening and well recognized as the scariest event we all have to face in our lives. But dying becomes more acceptable when you see it as a transition rather than a dissolution, and from this rationalization we derive less emotional trauma and stress, for everyone – you and your loved ones – and no punishing after affect for being wrong because, of course, if you are wrong, and there is nothing after death, you will be dead before you realize it? What could be more rational?

The life-ever-after aspect to our existence is one of the major tenets shaping our lives. We need to believe that we don't just evaporate off the face of the Earth when we die. God is our foundation for having this belief. Most mentally healthy people want to contribute a legacy that extends beyond their earthly life and, as a result, draw comfort and hope from the idea of eternal life. Indeed, both the desire to leave a positive legacy and the possibility of a day of reckoning motivates us to be more socially conscious, particularly toward people we don't personally know. If our lives were lived just for now and we didn't believe in facing consequences one day, or in the need to sacrifice for future generations, then it would shrink us down as individuals. For most of us our legacy would be restricted to our families and friends and only for our lifetimes. Such a belief has the capacity to make us more miserly and self-absorbed, especially as we age. Believing in an afterlife makes every individual more socially conscious and aware.

We can't prove God exists and we can't prove he doesn't. Some people feel silly believing in a faith-based concept with no firm scientific foundation. Especially one that has been subject to such fervent abuse by so many for so long and, as well, the basis of so much pain and destruction through the centuries. Other people may feel just as silly trying to adopt a purely factual approach to everyday living because there is so much we don't know. We are barely scratching the surface of knowledge in

this huge universe.

As for being self-consciousness about believing in a concept we can't see or hear or touch – love is one of the most popular and powerful forces in the world yet, we can't replicate it in a laboratory or even test for it. We are not even sure what it is but even science won't deny its existence.

The supremacy of science is based on the availability of provable facts and we have a long way to go in achieving a perfect knowledge base. One recent discovery by researchers is that dogs may be the best means of diagnosing certain cancers, particularly skin and prostate cancers? They can smell them, and for a pat on the head and a dog biscuit, they will tell you if you have a deadly disease. Our knowledge base has come a long way but a hundred years ago they also believed they had advanced to a very sophisticated state, and we look upon those times as just barely out of the dark ages. Where are we now on the scale of understanding? How much have we left to learn? Who really knows? One thing I am sure about is that determining the absolute truth about God's existence requires more knowledge than we possess.

In a world tending toward hard facts, atheism may be more justifiable and explainable but it is not superior. And, as far as I am concerned, distorting and redefining the concept of rationality to promote their beliefs makes atheists little better than the holy rollers whose performances they so enjoy ridiculing and condemning.

Section Four

Politics:

The Hoped-for Solution

Politics is so important that it may be humankind's greatest failure. It's everywhere in our lives, as hard as we try to ignore it. Few people understand politics and leadership, and even fewer want to. As a result, politicians can get away with talking black and white as they reach for power and shades of grey when they get it. But that may be our fault because we won't elect them if they refuse to speak certainties in an uncertain world. This must change if we are to survive a future where science and technology are constantly magnifying the ability of ever smaller groups to harm all humanity. But how should we change? This is my attempt at finding answers.

Chapter 16

Democracy and the Confusion of Equality

As communities, nations, even as a species, we continually face threats to our existence. That truth has never been more relevant than at the present time. Climate change, toxins in the environment, nuclear proliferation, pandemics, and social upheavals of all kinds, constantly place us at risk. Individuals have a limited ability to recognize all of these dangers, or define solutions and gather resources to defend against them. In recognition of that, we band together and form organizations, what we now loosely refer to as governments, to perform this vital and complex task.

Governing structures have been around since pre-civilization, from family hierarchy to tribal leaders and on up to the numerous complex configurations we experience today. Few of which, unfortunately, have a history of providing the greatest benefit to the greatest number. For those of us living in modern western societies, we lucked into the closest example of a success story. Our form of government provides us with more and better freedoms than the others, but being the best simply means the others are worse. We still have a long way to go.

If someone asked you for a one-word description of your political system the answer would probably be “democracy”, and most of us are quite smug about it because solidly democratic countries are still in the minority. It’s too bad that our smugness is more a matter of conditioning than knowledge.

As proud as most of us may be about our democratic lifestyles, our pride is based more on a wide acceptance of conventional wisdom than factual evidence. In truth, we can’t really be sure we live in a democ-

racy because, for all of the history and discussion this topic has generated, no widely accepted definition of democracy exists.

Renowned political scientists have put forth definitions and many others have added suggestions, or improvements, but none has come close to achieving dominance. Which leaves our best known, and most admired definition, a rhetorical one, and we got that from a politician, Abraham Lincoln.

Democracy is “Government of the people, by the people and for the people.” It’s a good definition, as far as it goes, but it’s pretty thin soup when it comes to setting up a model or defining the concepts. Basically, all it suggests is that individuals get an occasional say in the process... usually a vote.

Venturing into academia you find that political scientist E.E. Schattschneider felt that “conflict, competition, organization, leadership, and responsibility are the ingredients of a working definition of democracy”. Democratic theorists Austin Ranney and Willmoore Kendall speak of democracy requiring merely the potential for people to make decisions, when they feel it necessary, and not the need for them to be involved in the day to day detailed operations of government. These are barely a few of the suggestions being presented.

All of the above, of course, are discussing a particular kind of democracy, “representative democracy”, which places government in the trust of elected officials. We, the people, exercise our control over them only when an election takes place, but we do have the right to express our opinions as often as we wish. Whether they listen or not is up to them.

Alternatives to representative democracy do exist. A few countries, notably the United States, offer voters the right to put proposals on the ballot and have the general public directly vote, but only during an election year, and many aren’t binding. Recent advancements in technology have inspired new techniques for more direct participation through online resources such as e-mail, or “texted” opinions. In rare instances, you may have the ability to question your representative directly but, regardless of the advancements in technology, such attempts at improving public participation seldom receive enthusiastic support from those already in government.

Some theorists have suggested that we don't really need to have a hard and fast definition for democracy because, as societies evolve, democracy needs the flexibility to evolve with it. I don't agree. Having no real definition for democracy is more than just an embarrassment to political science. It means we have no measuring stick to tell how well we, or other democracies, are performing.

So, why is defining democracy difficult? We all see how it operates, the terminology surrounding democracy has been around for generations, it's discussed in every corner of the world, what's the hold-up? The basic problem is, a definition would, in effect, create a means of measuring the quality or extent of democracy our governments are allow us. Possibly, none of them want to face that measurement, and, apparently, as citizens, we aren't interested in forcing them to meet a strict standard.

Here's my personal definition. "A democracy is any form of governance that seeks to distribute power equally among its constituents". Plain Jane, isn't it? Certainly, not as impressive as Lincoln's, but it's not impressive because it's obvious and sets a clear objective. "To distribute power equally among constituents" would mean both reducing the power of leadership, and increasing the level of equality. Few politicians want to do either?

One of the key barriers to achieving real democracy is that when we are formulating our perfect model, we run headlong into a wall of mythology and misinformation about why democracy exists in the first place.

Up until a couple thousand years ago it was generally accepted that a popular leader provided the best model for governance. However, as populations grew it became more difficult for individuals to determine whether leaders were acting in the people's best interests. Human nature being what it is, the power of leadership is often too great a temptation for leaders not to indulge their own whims and fancies – at a cost to the people. When this abuse becomes obvious, and oppressive, citizens have been known to rebel and seek a different model.

In other words, democracy never was about giving "power to the people". Democracy came about as a means of taking power out of the hands of individuals. Power is an opioid, it corrupts individuals. Mod-

ern science has even shown that having power rewires your brain and, therefore, when we give power to individuals it changes them. People learned this lesson eons ago – from harsh experience. “We the people” ended up with power because we can’t trust “they the individual” – but it doesn’t keep them from constantly trying to get it back, and they do, far too often.

Although the idea of spreading power throughout a large percentage of the population was put forth many times in previous centuries, it met extreme resistance from those who didn’t want to lose their power. It has only been in the last 250 years that democracy has made serious inroads into governance – and it’s hardly certain that it will last even now.

Once democracy became established as a concept it had to be put into action and, as they say, the devil is in the details. In most cases, to reassure the population, and get their support, an underlying set of rules for governing was established – what we refer to as a constitution. It details the rights and protections the elected governments must provide as well as the procedures for choosing who will govern. Although open to change, most constitutions are difficult and time consuming to alter, and that can be both a good and bad thing. It’s good in that it allows time for reflection and discussion on the consequences, and bad in that problems within the constitution take a long time to fix. Most constitutions are written with great rhetoric, espousing high ideals and grand principles. As a rule, governments, and their populations, seek loopholes so they don’t have to match those ideals.

For instance, democracy, in popular theory, is supposed to mirror the will of the majority. Yet, virtually all democratic governments allow a single person or group of people to veto the wishes of the majority. Whether it’s a Presidential, Prime Ministerial, Cabinet, or a Supreme Court decision, it can override the stated wishes of the people and we, the people, have no recourse but to wait until the next election to show our displeasure, or reverse their decision... if that is even possible, which it often isn’t.

How governments regularly ignore democracy is by designating a hierarchy of special people who have more power than the rest of us – some of them a frightening amount more. This causes a few problems because our constitutions tell us we are all equal in the eyes of govern-

ment. So how do we solve this discrepancy?

Almost everyone accepts, in theory, that for a true democracy to exist, equal rights must be solidly embedded in the law. This is high school Civics 101. Equality is implied in most constitutions simply in referring to us as “the people”, without any further qualification. Lincoln, in that great defining speech at Gettysburg, didn’t say, “the white people”, or “the male people”, or “the land-owning people”, he simply said “the people”.

Given the historic importance of equal treatment as the basis for democracy (as well as for freedom, the free market, and most religions), my impression is that equality isn’t explained in a very detailed manner because once you get beyond theoretical or rhetorical definitions it is a difficult concept for people to absorb. As strange as this may sound, equality may even conflict with our genetic coding.

Consider this, as a principle, equality is one of the weirdest and most contrary concepts in all human history. It sounds simple. We are taught in school that everyone is equal in the eyes of the law and, as a result, our country must treat each and every one of us with the same respect and consideration. We are so proud of this we even regularly declare our desire that some day the whole world will share the same rights and freedoms as we do. It makes for very emotional speeches. But if you consider that we have about eight billion people in this world, and no two of them are exactly the same, or ever likely will be, you may begin to understand the quandary we face.

Do we treat the pathological killer as equal to the saint, the pauper as equal to the billionaire, the head of state as equal to the illegal immigrant, or the mentally handicapped as equal to the genius? “Yes”, is the theoretical answer but “No” is the human nature answer because as individuals we place values on people. We treat people according to their perceived significance, to us, to our community, or to our nation. Be honest, we are talking day-to-day reality not theory.

Looking back on recent history, (recent to me anyway), Leon Baradat, in his book “Political Ideologies Their Origins and Impact”, suggests that Hitler and Mussolini made use of this “natural” belief when they voiced a commonly accepted opinion back before the Second World

War. They argued that:

“people...are quite obviously unequal: Some are stronger, some are more talented, some are more attractive. To act as though people are equal is to ignore the obvious and to fatally deny a basic fact of nature... being unequal, they cannot each make the same level of contribution - some are able to contribute more and some less - and citizens cannot rightfully expect to be rewarded equally for unequal contributions. Therefore, those who give the greatest service deserve the greatest benefit.”

Simple justice appears to be the basis for their beliefs. To treat people equally is blatantly unjust. Of course, the subtle suggestion here is that when you weigh a person's value by how much they contribute to the nation you are saying, in effect, people exist for the benefit of the nation. Most of us have the somewhat foggy notion that the nation exists for the benefit of its people.

Baradat also made it clear in his book that Hitler and Mussolini also believed equality and therefore democracy were the death of a nation. Government should be left to the elite in society and both dictators referred to the vast majority of their populations as *“the herd”*. Democracy, they believed, *“reduced government to the lowest common denominator.”*

I have a sneaking suspicion that most ultra powerful leaders eventually share the same beliefs.

Our constitutions say that simply by being alive (or maybe conceived, it's a grey area) you have access to all the rights and freedoms offered by your nation, and your opinion as a voting age adult will contribute equally to the selection, and direction, of your government.

We all know it doesn't quite work like that. Our representatives need resources to get elected and the people who give them those resources want something in return. Anyone who says differently is being disingenuous or living in a dream world. Whether financial contributors want candidates to follow a particular ideology, or throw some taxpayers money their way when they get elected, they are trading their support in the hope of getting something back once a candidate is in power. And the more you give the more you are, supposedly, entitled to

in return. It's a flawed system but ultimately fixable in the long run. As Winston Churchill once stated, democracy is the worst form of government in the world except for all the others.

When politicians take considerations of personal wealth or re-election into account in public decision-making, what they sacrifice is equality... and because equality is difficult to understand and measure in day-to-day decision-making it becomes vulnerable to this sacrifice.

Just take a look at the process of selecting a representative. The politicians we elect are special people. They are smarter, more successful, more honest, come from better families, and have more powerful friends and admirers than we do. That is how their campaigns sell them to us, and we buy it. So, we elect them not because we believe they are equal to us but because we believe they are special – better than most. How could we expect people who are elected by being above and beyond the rest to consider everyone as equals once they hold power?

Sorry, that was a bit of a rant, back to social science. Imagine again how it is that no two people in an eight-billion-person world will ever be exactly the same; look exactly the same, think exactly the same, see life from exactly the same perspective, or have exactly the same values – and the variations are as extreme as they are infinite but, in spite of this, in a true democracy everyone is entitled to exactly the same rights... and now we begin to realize the complex nature of a system based on equality.

As awkward as political equality may seem you must remember, treating people equally is not about liking them, or agreeing with them, or even tolerating them. Equality is a golden rule thing. If we don't give everyone the same consideration, the same human rights we all feel entitled to, then, we are, in effect, allowing some one, or some group, the power to classify select individuals as being worth less, or worth more, than the rest of us. When that happens, ultimately, what is to stop them from deciding at a later date that you and I don't quite measure up either.

Equality is an ideal in every sense of the word, and most likely is impossible to achieve in its purest form, but it is through working to achieve it that we approach real democracy. Equality and democracy are linked,

inseparable, without one you can never achieve the other.

Chapter 17

Democracy Interruptus

Why are so many democratic governments considered a failure? We elect a new slate of candidates every four or five years following an election chock full of positive vibes and popular promises. Yet, often, in short order, our expectations are dimmed as election promises are ignored.

Voters aren't children. We know that governments are flawed. People are flawed. We understand that we have no right to expect even near perfection just because we attempt to select the best individuals, place them under the same roof, and instruct them to solve our problems.

What disturbs me is how fast and easily they stray from their election rhetoric. During the election each of them loudly and ardently promised to serve the public, ignoring their own selfish desires – and they come across so very convincingly and with great charm – but, in the end, nothing guarantees either their commitment or their honesty, and we have no recourse when we discover they lied.

Democracy depends on a high level of integrity and unselfishness, and not all people who aspire to positions of political power are so endowed. How we deal with this aspect of government may be the greatest political challenge we face and, importantly, if we fail to deal with it, this may turn into our most serious failure as a society.

Representative government has turned into Forrest Gump's box of chocolates. You choose first and then find out later what you've got. Most adults have witnessed this hard reality multiple times, learning that post-election realities seldom mirror pre-election promises but, un-

like chocolates, you can't just spit out a government because broken promises leave a bad taste in your mouth. How has this political sleight-of-hand become so accepted, and why do we allow ourselves to be so deceived over and over again?

Well, there are some obvious reasons for this failure. First and foremost, the job we are hiring politicians to do, (and it is a hiring process), is stunningly ambiguous... are they leaders or followers? Do we elect them to determine what is best for us and make the required decisions – or do we elect them to represent our wishes regardless of their personal feelings? Everyone has their own opinion but no rules exist. Simply stated; democratic systems of government routinely leave this question unanswered and, by doing so, we lose a fundamental tool for evaluating our choices. We may criticize a politician for ignoring the views and opinions of the electorate but they respond by suggesting it's their prerogative to show leadership. Or, conversely, we may criticize them for making an obviously poor decision, but they excuse themselves by explaining they were just following the wishes of constituents. How do we judge them when the criterion is a moving target?

It is possible that being a leader or follower doesn't come down to a black and white argument. Representatives are expected to have a more complete view of issues than constituents. It's their job to discover the finer points of a problem before they make a decision.

As constituents, we provide great quantities of money to finance resources, which help politicians make decisions. They have entire ministries, consultants, research staff and, of course, lobbyists to answer their questions on particular issues (I am aware we don't finance lobbyists – at least not directly). With all of this access to information and professional advice they should be in a better position to decide issues, so why don't we just accept their leadership role and trust them? The answer to that question is, unfortunately, bad experience; we have let them make decisions on our behalf in the past and we've been burned in the process.

Many decisions made by government favor specific interests and are in opposition to what is best for the majority of constituents? It happens with every government, in every democratic country, and has since the first feeble attempts at this form of distributing political power. The

question then becomes: Why do we have elected representatives who neither represent our best interests nor display real leadership by making the best choices on our behalf? The answer revolves around lack of incentive.

To whom do elected representatives owe their loyalty? In theory, they serve a constituency of voters, but we all know it doesn't end there. Most politicians belong to parties and parties have leaders and platforms and ideologies – and elected representatives often owe much of their success to riding the coattails of the party or its leader. Politicians also owe an allegiance to their financial supporters. Politics is an expensive business and the candidate with the deepest pockets usually wins the election. As much as we hear about major financial contributors only wanting to help a candidate for ideological reasons, what successful businessman, or woman, hands out money with no thought to benefits in the future. And don't forget the candidate themselves. Why did they go into politics? What is their personal dream and what are they willing to sacrifice to achieve this? If it comes down to a choice between benefits for their constituents and the fulfillment of personal ambitions, which direction will they go? It doesn't even end there. Politicians, being human, may have strong loyalties to their religion, family, past employers or industries, former colleagues, or countries of origin and, no doubt, much more. (Mackenzie King, Prime Minister of Canada during World War II, used to hire a psychic and discuss his policy options with great minds of the past – and his late mother.) So, in the face of these divided loyalties, how do we get politicians to do their job and represent our interests, if that is, indeed, their job, which we haven't really established yet.

Most politicians do harbor further aspirations in the political world and, therefore, are unlikely to stray from the leader's or party's wishes. In the event this goes against the desires of their constituents, that becomes a challenge each must face prior to the next election, and they usually do, given enough time, but why do “we the people” put up with such shenanigans? Why do we let them off the hook time and again by re-electing them? Have we just gotten used to unrepresentative government? Have we simply become immune to being ignored between elections and lied to during them? Is the problem a lack of light at the end of the tunnel when it comes to seeing improvements... settling for

poor government in fear of worse government?

Unfortunately, when you look at politics through the lens of history, the idea of politicians needing the advice and consent of constituents has always been pretty much a mythological construct anyway. In fact, all things considered, very little evidence exists showing democracy was ever successful in providing the general population with ongoing direct representation in government, at any time from the Magna Carta onward.

Politicians fear retaliation. Their weakest interval is during elections and that motivates them to build up a portfolio of beneficial services to constituents. At the same time, they are fully aware of their ability to overwhelm voters with an intense and concentrated barrage of information during the election process. Striking the right balance between pleasing us with promises of goodies, and overwhelming us enough to submerge past foibles, often determines the outcome of an election. If neither of these appear to be working and they face losing the election, they may relinquish some of their power to hold on to the rest. Over time, what successes “we the people” have achieved in the area of improved rights and freedoms arises from trade-offs between angry constituencies and vulnerable governments. During those rare occasions, political resources are transferred to us in an effort by our elected representatives to continue doing what pleases them. It sounds depressingly negative but that may be the nature of the democratic beast. Evidently, governments don’t really want your input unless it will affect their re-election.

One example shows up in how communications technology has improved incredibly in today’s world. The facilities for interactive discussions with government are now very sophisticated but opportunities are no more available than during the “town hall” days. Paradoxically, at the same time it’s getting even easier for government to distance itself from the people. Populations have grown at such a rate that the size and makeup of constituencies normally precludes regular meaningful contributions by voters.

To illustrate; the United States holds itself up as the pinnacle of democratic achievement, yet, the average American Congressperson has a constituency of approximately 900,000 people. How do you en-

gauge that many people in a discussion about any issue let alone every issue? Even the most important issues are now measured by opinion poles that randomly select a statistically significant number of constituents. Anyone who knows what it's like to be on the answering end of such poles knows it's a pain in the butt responding to the often incomplete and witless questions. Not to mention the frequency of the calls, coming in at a rate of two or three per week, year-round, if we don't block them. One of the reasons people purchase "call display" is to avoid such annoyances but by doing so we are just shooting ourselves in the foot because these poles have become fundamental to the process of governing. Arguably, they are more important than your vote.

So, what is the solution to improving democracy? Again, we're back to the original question. Are we putting politicians in charge when we elect them or are we hiring them to represent the wishes of their constituency? Another major reason we allow politicians to hide from this discussion is based on a strange psychological (or sociological, I'm not sure which), quirk in our human makeup. A large portion of our society, perhaps even a majority, talk of believing in democracy but, when pressed, appear to prefer to live under some form of governing "royalty". It sounds goofy, and it isn't normally expressed as such, but that is what's reflected in our choices. Elections have become a search for "special" people to govern us. Many times, I have been told, both on the street and even in the halls of academia (where they should know better) that the ultimate form of government is a benevolent dictatorship. Well, it is certainly the ultimate form of government is you are lazy and stupid.

This argument has softened and become understated in recent generations but it still underlies many of our choices. The truth is, no super politicians exist and, human nature being what it is, if someone was, indeed, that good when they assumed office, what keeps them from changing when they gain real power? And even super politicians don't live forever, so what happens when they're gone and we're left looking for the next Jesus Christ with a doctorate in Macroeconomics. That is, providing the late, great, leader hasn't already chosen a family member to fill the void. And if you think that only happens in the third world, peruse any list of elected officials and see if you don't recognize a few last names.

Isn't it time to forget about the possibility of choosing people who've ingested the "royal jelly", or were born with famous family names, to lift the burden of governing from our shoulders? The reason we created democracy in the first place is to keep power out of the hands of "the few" and distribute it among "the many". That means each of us taking part and doing our share of reinforcing these necessary freedoms we struggled so long to achieve.

Virtually every country in the world has a population demanding greater representation from their politicians, and every set of new candidates starts by promising more accountability, more transparency, more openness, and more responsibility to the people, and, thereafter, follows a do-no-such-thing agenda. Voting has become like a Charlie Brown cartoon where Lucy convinces us, again, that this time she really will let us kick the football only to have her snatch it away just before we make contact... and then walk unconcernedly off while we lie flat on our backs from the effort.

Changing our democratic system in favor of more rights and freedoms can only be accomplished by creating more immediate consequences for elected officials, and we don't have the tools to do this. In fact, in recent times a case can be made that elected representatives have not only avoided giving us more rights and freedoms, but have been consistently taking rights and freedoms away from us... and concentrating more power within government.

Therefore, the question remains: Is it possible to establish a relationship between constituents and elected representatives based on accountability? I'm not sure it is, at least without a revolution. To accomplish this goal we need candidates who will promise reform and carry through once in office. Unfortunately, we have no way of guaranteeing that outcome... and no incentive for representatives to do so because the kind of reforms we want reduce their power.

We have enshrined in our constitutions laws making politicians the only ones capable of changing the system, and regardless of what they promise, once elected, they can ignore us until the next election.

For real change to happen we need the ability to throw them out of office at any time a majority of us feel we aren't being represented. We

need the ability to fire them when they are sacrificing our welfare for their own selfish benefit. We need the ability to punish them for lying to us. We need the right to look for better representation at any time it appears their loyalties are being pledged elsewhere. In the language of politics, we need the ability to “recall” politicians based on a formula that isn’t weighted heavily in favor of the incumbent, which, in the few areas already having recall provisions, isn’t a reality.

Just imagine being able to fire your representative at any time... and how this would impact the political system.

No matter what the leader or party or financial supporters want, if we want something different our representative better toe the line. If they aren’t loyal to the people who voted for them, they are gone.

Politicians complain that viable recall legislation would bring about more elections and elections are expensive, but the reality is the vast amount of money spent in an election is from private donations and has strings attached. In the great scheme of government finance the cost of elections are a minor expense. And, besides, once the parties recognize that a representative needs to be responsible to stay elected – instead of just appearing responsible to get elected – they might begin choosing candidates we can be happy with over the long haul. We might, indeed, discover that recall is so viable a means of keeping representatives in tune with their constituency that scheduled general elections are not even necessary.

In the search for increased democracy, the technology now exists to bring constituents into the political mix. Each representative is now able to immediately explain and justify political decisions directly to the people and be questioned by constituents, but they avoid these confrontations – too busy, I suppose. However unlike facing questions from the opposition or the media, under threat of a recall, a representative’s refusal to answer constituent questions would have real consequences.

Section Five

Economics: Feudalism Refined

These next essays are fundamental to my belief system. I grew up with the principles espoused by economics. What I missed was the moment where they fell off a cliff and became something totally irrational. Economics was supposed to be the height of common sense, but politics and ideology have changed that.

Chapter 18

A True Free Market

First lets all repeat The Materialist Mantra. (If you are into “mantras” you should start the process with an “ooooohmmmm” or some such calming pronouncement.) Okay, ready; altogether now, from the heart

—

The world is divided into winners and losers.
Enough is never enough.
Excess is success.
And for the right price you can buy anything.

The final phrasing should be followed by a deep sigh... aaaaaaaaaah. Since the ‘08 financial crisis you don’t hear the mantra spoken as often or as loudly, but it’s coming back. For the record, I’m a big fan of the free market. I just believe this makes me a rare commodity... much more so than you might imagine. Let me explain.

One of the primary properties of democracy, from its ancient beginnings to the present time, has been the idea of its symbiotic relationship with a free market. As that great iconic fixture of economics, Nobel Prize winner Milton Friedman in his book, “Capitalism and Freedom”, remarks,

“Historical evidence speaks with a single voice on the relationship between political freedom and a free market. I know of no example in time or place of a society that has been marked by a large measure of political freedom, and that has not also used something comparable to a free market to organize the bulk of economic activity.”

Apparently, the freedom to engage in economic transactions either leads to, or stems from, the freedom to choose your government. Understanding the mutual dependency of a democratic political system – based on equal rights – and a free market economic system – based on the right to engage in uninhibited transactions – is vital to understanding where the system breaks down... and it does break down. Anyone who has driven by a healthy, fit, male standing on a street corner holding a sign saying, “Will work for food”, has witnessed the extent of the problem.

To put it simply, Friedman and his Chicago school economists are only right to a point because democracy and the free market are co-dependent only so long as we understand the nature of freedom.

As I attempted to explain in a previous chapter, pure freedom is a myth, real freedom can only exist under a system of mutually agreed upon constraints. In simple terms, the classic ideal of a free market as an unconstrained market is pure nonsense.

If you free a market from constraints you remove the laws protecting the integrity and equality of transactions. In other words, laws that enforce contracts and protect the participants from coercion and deceit. With no constraints, the “free” market becomes just another arena for the exercise of power.

Laws and regulations create and preserve the market by legislating equality, by compelling participants to adhere to their contracts, and by invalidating and, thus, counterbalancing, coercion. And in cases where disputes over interpretation arise, laws create a forum for adjudicating the argument. A true free market is one regulated to produce equitable outcomes. More specifically, it is a market free of power and deceit, and it can only exist in the presence of well-defined and equally enforced laws.

If you doubt what I am saying, try and get hold of a free trade agreement between two or more countries. They are huge complex documents full of conditions and arbitration procedures designed to level the playing field. The goal of these agreements isn't freedom from rules; it's an acceptance of the same rules to provide equal benefits for all. Yet, somehow, among the vast storehouse of rhetoric that accompanies a free market system, this simple truth gets misplaced and we are inundated

with “free-marketeers” preaching to us about the evils of regulating the marketplace and how this infringes on market efficiency.

The gross deception is that while free-marketeers are praising the concept of a free market what they actually are seeking is an environment suitable for “free enterprise”, and that is based not on equal trade, value for value, but on pure materialism, excess for its own sake.

The free market is where you take your goods and services for fair trade. The free enterprise system is where you take your competitive advantage and trade for material wealth. The free enterprise doctrine is founded on greed and materialism, where everything of value is measured in dollars, and its goal is the creation of individual wealth. Don’t get me wrong on this; wealth creation can be a good thing for an economy, but not if its ultimate outcome is to concentrate power and resources in the hands of a few, or a few hundred, like-minded individuals whose primary goal is the accumulation of wealth.

Materialism has become the reigning ideology among the business community in North America, and probably most other places in the world. The allure of going into business at present is to make your fortune and you are always on the lookout for the big score. If the consumer wins as well, that’s good, and, if not, that’s life. Two generations have passed since I received my business degree and, granted, my memory isn’t what it once was, but I still remember vividly many of the discussions we as students had about what the future would hold for us. At graduation, most of my friends went on to various roles in the business world and they were all good solid people who I was proud to know and spend time with, but we were young, and wanted to be successful, and I remember how we used to joke about the ethics of business. With enough incentive, any of us could have been enticed to see things that weren’t there, or miss things that were, and forty plus years of living have done nothing but reinforce this opinion. As business people are fond of saying, “It’s a dog eat dog world” and “You gotta be tough to compete”.

Consciously or unconsciously, as we become part of the process, we find bits and pieces of the “Materialist Mantra” seeping into our value system until finally we adopt it wholly and without reservation. Equality is the ideology that supports a free market, and materialism is the

ideology that supports free enterprise... and as a nation we proudly proclaim our goal of sustaining both, which means we don't truly understand either.

Just to give you a better view of the ways a free enterprise system might manifest itself; imagine an economic system where more money can buy a business or individual "more equality", better protection for their rights. You can even buy extra "rights" in the form of tax concessions, tariff protection, and stiff regulations against competing products, or reduced enforcement of existing regulations, or cheap raw materials such as minerals, water and timber from public lands. And all you have to do is make big contributions to political campaigns and hire lobbyists to keep your wants and needs on the minds of the decision makers. If you still manage to screw things up, the government may even have to step in and pay your bills (Isn't that socialism?) just to keep the jobs you created from disappearing. It doesn't take much to imagine that scenario, does it?

Noted sociologist Warren Johnson writes in his book, "Muddling Toward Frugality", that "Equality... is an important value, but it conflicts with the values of the free enterprise system, which require inequality to motivate people". Simply put, that last statement is the monkey wrench that gets thrown into our economic system. We have been taught that being equal doesn't motivate people. We need some special carrot on the end of a stick to move us forward to a better life both as individuals and, collectively, as a society. Money will buy us a better life; and part of that life is the ability to expect better health, more security, special advantages for our children, greater influence in the political arena, better protection for our rights, and more respect and admiration from the general population. Lots of money makes us "more equal" or "privileged"... a winner. On the other hand, if you don't have excess money you have less value to society; you have less security, no special advantages, no influence on government, and less respect from your fellow citizens... a loser.

Any staunch free enterprise proponent will tell you the system works, and it works because the basis for its success is competition. If there is no chance of winning no one will risk competing and if there is no chance of losing it isn't a competition. This competitive spirit is what has made us a great society. We are naturally competitive because our

survival instinct has always rewarded an aggressive approach. To promote competition is to promote our survival and to inhibit competition is to sacrifice our chances for success. If everyone were to get an equal share regardless of skill or effort there would be no incentive to compete. Therefore, the cost of interfering in a competitive marketplace is the destruction of our society, because giving everyone an equal share destroys competition.

Does some of this sound familiar? I've been hearing it all my life. During the heat of the Cold War it was a staple of any economic discussion. I don't really object to it, including the statement that an equal share for everyone has a negative impact on motivation. However, the trick is not to confuse "equal rights" with an "equal share". In a democracy, everyone is entitled to equality, or equal rights, but not everyone is entitled to an equal share of the nation's wealth. People may be entitled to a minimal share, or subsistence share, as a human right, but if you work harder or longer or smarter, or do more difficult or dangerous work, than you are entitled to more than those who don't.

The basic argument in favor of competition is a strong one and I agree with much of it, particularly the part concerning the need for progressive incentives to improve ourselves. I also believe we have an inherently strong desire to compete because that is what helped our species survive. The mere fact that we exist means that everyone who went before us was competitive, and successful, so why shouldn't we be the same.

What makes most of the preceding statements about competition feel phony is that the people who use these arguments to justify their actions are generally hypocrites. First of all, if you look close enough you will find most free-enterprisers are not seeking competition they are seeking "competitive advantage". We tend to assume that a competition is a contest that happens between equals, or near equals, but this is seldom the case. Is it really a competition if some contestants are able to purchase competitive advantage; if you can skew the process so your chance of winning is so much higher than your chance of losing as to make it a remote possibility? For a competition to exist there has to be some leveling of the field, a counter-balancing of one strength or weakness for another.

Try looking at it from this perspective: If free-enterprisers seriously believed in the supremacy, and necessity, of competition for the survival of our way of life, wouldn't they push for government policies that lead to more competition. For instance: Why not educate each and every child in our society to the college or vocational level of their choice and then release them into the world with absolutely nothing – no debts, no personal wealth, no family connections – arranging the contest so as little as possible could interfere with the direct competition, thereby ensuring the purest form of competition? It won't happen, of course, because one of the reasons we justify chasing excess wealth is to pass it on to our children so they won't have to “go through what we did”. In other words, so they won't have to compete. As one of my economics professors used to say, “It may be a rat race but who says we all start at the same line.” Some people are born at the finish line.

This is where free enterprise unravels into elitism and special privilege at a cost to those who can't protect themselves. When you amass large amounts of wealth you apparently join the good-old-boys-self-protection-and-advancement-society. It used to be called the upper class.

Did you know that after the sub-prime mortgage debacle no Wall Street executive ever faced charges even though their actions caused a financial collapse that led to a world-wide recession, six million homes being foreclosed on in the United States alone, an almost unimaginable increase in government debt, which has to be paid off, plus untold individual family heartache on a world-wide scale? I will bet few of us are even surprised that these guys got away with it.

Of course, upper class children and their children's children go on to enjoy those same benefits and, thanks to the family wealth, they never really have to run the race. However, if they decide to compete, say for a governor's chair and, maybe, eventually, even the presidency (think about guys named Kennedy, Bush, or Trump), they are well situated far and above the person on the street who doesn't have their family resources.

Free enterprisers who talk the talk don't walk the walk. A large percentage of wealthy business people in this world didn't pull themselves up from their bootstraps. They got a substantial handout from mommy and daddy, and their family name and position in society often continue to

play a part in their day-to-day business dealings.

Theoretically, I suppose, a competition where everyone is totally equal will always end in a tie anyway, so there has to be a competitive advantage for someone to win. The pertinent question becomes was it “earned” or “purchased”. Competitions are how we select the best people, the best ideas, the best designs, the best products, the best of everything – at the best price. A properly regulated free market is how we are supposed to ensure competition will bring us that result. A free enterprise system doesn’t use the same rulebook and, as a result, all it provides is less than the best. Friedman was right about the close relationship between democracy and a free market... but which one do we repair first to try and achieve the other.

Chapter 19

Labor: The Tragedy of the Common

“The Tragedy of the Common” is a kind of parable. It was first published in pamphlet form by amateur mathematician William Forster Lloyd in 1833; then in 1968 Garrett Hardin, an environmental writer and professor of biology at the University of California, brought it back to life for an article he wrote. It has since become a staple on the discussion list of most social science programs, which is where I ran into it.

The story itself was very real and impacted many people who lived in rural England at the time. Each town or village had a “Commons” which was simply a pasture where every resident could release their cattle, sheep, and horses (not sure about pigs), to graze for little or no cost. The arrangement had worked for centuries with the size of the herds normally being controlled by the turbulent times, the cycles of poverty, war, and oppression, but when a period of stability and prosperity arose another situation would occur. If residents of the community found themselves in a position to purchase more livestock they most certainly would because the costs of feeding and pasturing the animals was borne by the Commons, yet, any increased value they accrued would go solely to the owner. Each person who added an animal to the Commons received full benefit for that animal when they sold it, or harvested the milk, or sheared the sheep, while the cost of the feed consumed on the common, by each additional animal, was shared by the village as equal owners of the Commons. As an individual, your benefit was maximized and your costs minimized. Any person making a rational judgment would normally take advantage of such a profitable situation – if they were able to. Except that if enough wealth existed in one herdsman or co-operative group of herdsmen, and they kept adding animals to this range, sooner or later the feed on the Commons would

be depleted and all of their animals would face starvation... and perhaps the herdsmen as well.

Hardin, the biologist and environmental professor, used this mathematical equation to relate how modern day “Commons” such as air, water and public land could be abused by companies whose benefits are greatly increased by not being required to clean the air and water they abused, or to put harshly treated land back in order, or pay for rigorous use of common properties such as roads and bridges. As a result, a segment of their costs is borne by all of society while they reap the profits alone. It was a strong argument, but it was sixty years ago, and there are still lots of companies messing up the air, land, and water so it wasn’t strong enough.

In the years since I studied this calculation I have seen the Tragedy of the Common recreated over and over on many differing levels and in many varied facets. The one that stands out most notably in my world has to do with labor.

For hundreds, even thousands, of years the majority of human societies were divided into basically two economic classes, a tiny number of rich landowners and a large number of poor working people. There was a middle class of tradesmen and merchants but it was very small and tended to be poorer than richer. When the industrial revolution arrived, along with the subsequent necessity of developing a more diversified labor pool, it brought with it the phenomena of organized labor.

The working classes quickly came to understand that if rich industrialists wanted the extra efficiency of specialized labor they should be prepared to pay a premium price. It was a long, hard, battle beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, often involving police and armies doing the dirty work for the wealthy, and politicians changing sides as they noted which way the winds were blowing. However, by the mid-nineteenth century democratic revolutions had changed the concept of nationalism, and citizenship, and industrialists slowly began losing ground to the organized workers they employed until, by the mid-twentieth century, organized labor was a powerful force in the life of all western economic and political systems.

Unions will recite a litany of their accomplishments but, bluntly stated,

what they got for their members was a greater share of the pie. Whether this greater share was embodied in the form of higher wages, paid time off, health benefits or pensions, when all was said and done working people, and their families, were handling more discretionary income than they had ever known before... and this simple fact changed the world. Instead of just merely surviving, paying the rent, putting food on the table and clothes on the kids, working people now had money in their pocket to spend on whatever they wanted, as opposed to what they needed. And they wanted their own homes and cars and modern appliances, and all manner of other items from toys to travel.

The big surprise came when the manufacturers noticed that, instead of going broke by paying more to their employees, business was booming. As the buying power of the worker increased the manufacturers needed to expand, just as their distribution networks and commodity producers needed to expand to supply the manufacturers. An economic growth spurt was underway the likes of which had never happened in history. Even the rich were getting richer as a whole new, fast growing, business class was emerging between the rich and poor, and all because this huge insatiable market had opened up and more money was going into the hands of people who were converting it to consumer goods as quickly as they could.

When the dust finally settled a powerful, multi-leveled middle class now existed who had the potential to call the shots politically and economically in all Western style democracies. Organized labor had lifted the prosperity level for all members of society and helped move the center of political power down from the elite class to the working classes where it could be more responsive and equitable.

These economic and political changes which began so gradually and picked up speed in the last century were so blatantly and obviously necessary to a society based on democratic ideals that it was hard to screw it up once it got started but, when most of the goals had been reached, organized labor eventually succumbed to the abuses of bureaucracy and self importance... and the search for even greater power through alliances with political parties and activist organizations.

I remember many years ago a friend of mine, who had recently been elected as a regional representative for a large union, was very excit-

ed about going to his first annual convention. He diligently made the rounds of the various union shops in his area, gathering issues for discussion, and off he went to the convention so armed and chock full of the best intentions. When he returned I asked him how things went? He replied, “Whales, all they wanted to talk about was saving #@&*% whales!” He didn’t stay long in his position. I personally believe this loss of focus on the day-to-day problems in the workplace is one reason unions have lost much of their relevance... along with the fact that if you change the goals of an organization you often attract a different kind of person into that organization.

More recently, what is hurting organized labor as much or more than their own misadventures is the movement to globalism. How does a working man, or woman, on the job in a modern democracy compete with virtual slave labor in a country where the only alternative to an early death from malnutrition or disease is to work at a barely subsistence wage? Even as these countries grow and provide greater remuneration for the workers the absence of pollution controls, and the lack of demand for a safe workplace, give their industries such a distinct advantage as to overcome all of the extra transportation costs involved with importing raw materials and exporting finished products.

We all want cheaper goods and services. The less an item costs the more our limited personal resources will purchase and, like the rational choice farmers on the Commons, rational consumers maximize their resources too. But businesses are also rational consumers. They consume labor and raw materials and convert them to a salable product in an effort to make a profit for their owners. All else being equal, the more they can reduce their costs the higher will be their profit. This is where we approach the time bomb in the system. What cascaded the economy to incredible heights over such a short period of decades from the late 1800’s to the 1950’s also has the ability to implode it.

The working people who provide the labor for these industries are also the consumers of the final product. For every dollar you take out of the hands of working people you remove it, (and the multiplier effect it creates by being spent quickly and on consumer goods), from the entire economy. In a minimum wage world, few people will buy new homes, new cars, new appliances or expensive vacations, or anything else unless they have to. It’s a subsistence wage.

Organized labor is weaker now than it has been for generations. Business and industry know this and have been trying to take advantage by clawing back wages and benefits that were conceded in the days before globalism. Where governments used to patronize union leadership for the votes of their members and provide laws and regulations protecting workers rights, now they are deregulating or under regulating industries and facilitating the flow of low expectation workers from poorer countries... even sometimes turning a blind eye to illegal workers. And it's all fully justified by the promise of cheaper goods to consumers. It isn't a grand scheme or conspiracy. It's happening one business, one industry, one factory at a time.

Business owners see the advantage they can gain by lowering the cost of labor, often their greatest expense. Indeed, if their competitors are able to accomplish this goal a business risks suffering a competitive disadvantage by not following suit. Labor costs are lowered by moving factories to a cheaper (mostly foreign) labor market or by setting up new factories where each worker is part-time or a "contractor" and not entitled to benefits, or factory owners simply claw back wages from union workers under the threat of leaving or shutting down the factories. The majority of these actions mean very little when a few businesses achieve their goal but as this momentum moves through the entire economy problems arise.

Just as in the Tragedy of the Commons, what was a rational choice for each business becomes a disaster for the entire economy. If low wages become the standard for working people discretionary income is drastically reduced, consumer spending evaporates, saving rates dry up, and taxes, particularly income taxes – the engine that drives government services, are hit doubly hard because they are a progressive tax... and this lowering of wages brings a reverse multiplier effect. When low wage workers stop buying those complex consumer goods other businesses shut down, releasing more desperate workers into the market, bidding wages even lower thereby reducing spending and tax revenue even more. This economic implosion may be grounded in the personal self-interest of one segment of an economy but it gradually creates an unsustainable economic environment for the entire economy. Meanwhile, governments who have generally been facilitating these actions in an effort to, in their words, "sustain the economy", through provid-

ing cheaper consumer goods and services, seem oblivious to the longer-term effects.

Globalization truly has become inevitable. That train is rolling and there is little anyone can do to stop the international redistribution of wealth and power... which means our standard of living is bound to be lowered as we are forced to share the bounty of this earth with everyone else. Governments may not be able to stop that process but they may cushion it – if they create a realistic dialogue with their citizens. This could give us time to gradually adjust our lifestyles and our value systems. Governments exist to solve the problems that we, as individuals, can't solve, but they can only do that effectively if they are seen to be working for everyone, equally.

At the heart of every economic system is confidence. The '08 market crash and credit crunch was all about a loss of confidence, just as the run up to its previous heights resulted from its overabundance. If we trust that leaders are doing their best on our behalf we can maintain our confidence. We can adjust to having less. Real wages haven't increased in the last twenty years but cheaper consumer goods, especially in high tech goods, helped us feel like we were moving forward. It can be done, as long as we are given time to prepare, and as long as we are secure in the understanding that the losses we suffer are proportional. Keep in mind that those offshore workers who are taking our jobs know what we have. They see it on TV and read about it on internet sites, and they want it. They will organize and demand higher wages and get them, and that is a good thing.

When times get tough and we see decision-makers intent on sacrificing our well-being and following convoluted ideologies as a means to favor powerful supporters, confidence in our governing system is lost. It's called the Tragedy of the Commons because without transparency, mutual support, and honesty, there is always a potential for tragic outcomes.

Chapter 20

Conservative Capitalist Fascists vs. Liberal Socialist Commies

Economics is the study of how to best manage scarce or finite resources. When you consider that almost everything in the universe is limited in some way this would suggest that economics is really the study of how to best manage just about everything, and that suits economists just fine. (There are even economic theories modeling love and fear.) Everyone knows that economics is a complicated enough discipline all by itself, but when you add in the puzzle we call politics, arguments concerning a particular economic policy often display more fantasy than forensics.

It has been said, somewhat sarcastically, that if you put four economists in a room you'll end up with five differing opinions, and in the case of the economists who pass judgement on government policy you might as well add that none of those opinions will likely matter. At the present time, it seems that before a government policy can be passed it must endure a test that rates it on a scale somewhere between liberal and conservative values, and it must correspond to the majority of legislators positions on how it fulfills those values.

The primary difference, supposedly, is that liberal politicians believe we should focus on doing what is best for people, while conservative politicians believe we should focus on doing what is best for the economy, and the people will benefit automatically. If that sounds to you like a fine line you are not alone – especially when you consider that any perusal of history over the last fifty or sixty years shows that some of the most conservative economic policies have been instigated by liberals and some of the most liberal by conservatives.

To make matters even more complicated, when either side is not getting the desired response from the electorate they expand the argument from the narrow liberal/conservative scale to an even more divisive capitalist/socialist ideology. This way there can be no mistaking their condemnation of those who stand in opposition to their policies. Therefore, what we end up watching is leftist, socialist, liberals, and rightist, capitalist, conservatives squaring off and telling us which policies are worthy of our support and which are a disaster waiting to happen – and they do this with such passion that not only has each become the enemy of the other but, so has anyone with the temerity to reside on the middle ground. I doubt if many of these people truly know the basics of what they are saying or, for that matter, care, but let's explore those concepts anyway.

Capitalism is an economic system based on free markets and supported by private ownership of the means of production. Socialism, on the other hand, is an economic system where government owns and, therefore, controls the means of production, but only if you live in the United States. Americans, it appears, have trouble separating socialism from their arch enemy communism. In the rest of the world socialism is an economic system based on the equitable distribution of wealth. Ownership of the means of production is how communists believed they could achieve their socialist goals. They were wrong and they failed. They didn't understand the value of progressive incentives or the flaws inherent in centralized decision-making. In hindsight, it appears that communism was as much about punishing the rich as elevating the poor.

Karl Marx, that tireless proponent of communism, aside from being a brilliant thinker and intellectual bully, believed that, ultimately, everyone wanted to be equal, and he wrote very powerful arguments in favor of this fantasy. It helped greatly that working people of his era were exposed to incredible abuse and, regardless of how hard they worked, they lived a life of bare subsistence while the company owners lived a life of lavish and obscene decadence. Given the contrast, and the lack of much to lose on the part of working people, the idea of a revolution followed by a policy of equal treatment, had to look good. Marxist revolutions subsequently became popular in many parts of the world, particularly where poverty and blatantly unequal wealth distribution were the norm.

Communism may have been based on a faulty premise but much of the early results were positive. Wealth was divided up and the working poor saw their position in society improve with better housing, health care, education for their children, and the promise of benefits in their old age. The socialism aspect of communism was positive. Everyone likes getting a larger slice of the pie. However, once past the initial euphoria, reality set in and the goofy logic of treating everyone as if they were soldiers in an army of clones began to cause problems. Human nature began to reassert itself.

Nobody wants to be equal. We want everybody else to be equal but we all want to be special and recognized for our uniqueness. We can accept a world where we are all “treated” equally but only if we have opportunities to excel and display our special characteristics. Communism didn’t provide such opportunities. In fact, in its earliest stages it punished you for seeking them.

Strictly speaking, socialism’s ideal of an equitable distribution of wealth is a positive policy, but governments are traditionally inept at determining who deserves what and seeing that those truly in need get the proper help. On the other hand, the progressive incentives available in a more market-oriented system do promote superior productive efficiency. Unfortunately, this also means they traditionally ignore the “unproductive” aspects of humanity. Capitalism shows little consideration for the chronically ill, physically or mentally disabled, or those who have been victims of abuse or trauma, leaving them unable to function in a competitive workplace.

If the buzzword of capitalism is productivity, its lifeblood is profit. When your company is productive and your costs are both under control and reasonable there is a high probability your profits are suitable and your prospects for growth are positive. Halleluiah, you are winning the battle, making money for your shareholders, and creating a few jobs in the process – and the last thing you need is to have government interfering in your activities. Yet, on the negative side, many things that improve business productivity are, in fact, harmful to people.

Pollution for one; some products have a very dirty manufacturing process and keeping the air, water, and land clean during this process is costly and of little or no benefit to the company’s bottom line. If a gov-

ernment enforces high standards on industry some companies may not be viable and the employment opportunities they create may disappear. If standards are low, or unenforced, business has a greater potential for profit but one byproduct of under-regulation is that people who are physically affected by pollution may become unemployable through disability and, thereafter, a burden on the economy.

Safety is another area of low return and high cost for producers. Employee safety is a major component in most industries, although some complain not major enough – worker/management committees often disagree on the fine points of a safe operation and government departments are normally called upon to be the arbitrators of such disagreements. Again, lower costs make a more viable industry but disabled workers and their families become a cost to the overall economy.

As for the actual products placed in the marketplace, if they contain substances that prove harmful to the public, whether through negligence or bad luck, or have aspects that render them injurious to the user, governments are expected to prevent this occurrence or, at least, discover and warn the public and punish the offender.

In spite of all these well-known realities, policing industry is considered by many as a socialist undertaking because it inhibits an industry's productive focus. It is a use of government resources that interferes with the maximizing of productivity and the minimizing of cost and, often, is reputed to be accomplished by people in a far-off location who are mandated to oversee a process normally outside their expertise.

So where should we err when balancing human health against a healthy economy? If this sounds like an easy decision that may be because you aren't the one making it. Anyone who has ever been involved in safety or health issues surrounding industry knows how incredibly complex and divisive this is.

If you really want to add a confusing aspect to this balancing act between public service and private industry throw in the (always on the horizon) concept of war, which is generally considered a bad thing for people, (seeing as they die from it), but in some industries, it can be very good for productivity. War is paid for by governments and puts huge numbers of people on the government payroll but, in spite of this,

it is often encouraged by industry. Many businesses do incredibly well in times of war and are not averse to supporting “hawks” on the government side in the hope of preparing for “manageable conflict opportunities” (i.e. wars). The justification for this particular capitalist role reversal in favor of “big government” is often stated as patriotism and self-defense.

At this point it behooves me to remind you that corporations, by definition, are neither socialist nor capitalist. Indeed, they hold no allegiance to anything beyond the conditions of their charter. They are simply a legal mechanism, a means for entrepreneurs to attract capital by reducing risk and responsibility. Our governments long ago recognized the validity and efficiency of corporations and gave them special legal status, as if they were a living, breathing entity, but, of course, you can’t punish them like people because they are just a name on a piece of paper.

As a result, corporate success or failure is simply a measure of profits and no matter what the company does to achieve these profits the owners are only liable for the amount of money they have invested. By law no one can demand a greater responsibility be placed on corporate owners. If, for instance, a Japanese power company is found liable for damages caused by radioactivity from a nuclear disaster, and can’t pay all the costs, someone else will have to, but not specifically the owners, they are protected.

This protection for investors is why corporate entities were invented and why they have come to predominate in world economics, and this is why we can’t rely on them to exemplify social responsibility. There is no “heart” written into the charter of a corporation. Regardless of how many people work for a corporation, or who is on the board of directors, or who sits in the CEO’s chair, or how they represent themselves in their advertising, there is, in truth, no humanity to a corporate entity. Such things inhibit the free flow of capital and risk shareholder confidence, which sounds cold and uncaring but, in turn, provides a necessary objectivity on our path to prosperity.

On the other hand, although socialism’s most famous experiment, communism, was a failure in terms of aligning with human nature, the goals of socialism are alive and flourishing throughout the world. In fact, so-

cialism is far more prevalent today than ever before, even in the United States, a country almost rabid about its free market affiliations.

In most modern industrialized countries, the Robin Hood function, taking from the “haves” and giving to the “have-nots”, is now accomplished under the many guises of taxation. Income taxes, for example, are what pay most of government’s bills and they were designed to be progressive (in theory) where those who make the most pay the highest percentage of their income. Taxation in general supports such social programs as Medicaid, food stamps, welfare, housing allowances, old age pensions, public schools, legal aid, fire fighters, the military, police, disease control, and many more universally accessible programs which are funded by government revenue – all raised through taxation.

Significant variations in the level of participation are evident among industrialized countries, with various South Asian nations and the United States at one end of the spectrum and the Scandinavian and south European countries occupying the other... but this is all a matter of degree. The United States, for instance, still embraces social programs, still redistributes income, and is, thus, a socialist country.

Capitalism has evolved to a stated belief in the necessity of unfettered markets allowing capital to flow directly toward productive enterprises; with its prime tenet being that only consumer preference can regulate the market in such a way as to achieve maximum benefit for all, based on the supply of, and demand for, particular goods and services. (Whew! That’s a mouthful.) As I have previously stated in a chapter on markets, there can be no such thing as an unregulated free market because it is the regulations that provide the freedoms, so the cries for absolute freedom are founded on self-serving or faulty logic.

Indeed, a strong case might be made that capitalism has become synonymous with providing direct redistribution of wealth from the middle classes to the upper classes via the use of business and industrial subsidies, protective tariffs, tax “incentives”, cheap public goods such as land, water, minerals, and in some cases electric power, along with public infrastructure (roads, bridges, water distribution, and power plants) much of which is paid for by middle income taxation. As one example; recently, some of the largest corporations in the world have pressured governments into “bailing them out” when they made poor

business decisions and suffered what should have been catastrophic losses. Instead, thanks to the public purse they were back to making huge profits in no time. Their claim of being “to big to fail” turned out to be true, yet, they still bristle at the thought of accepting socialist ideals.

In their defense, capitalist economists argue that most middle incomes are derived from the corporations who employ those workers and without the corporate structure the work force would be a fraction of what it is now. In fact, they could say that prosperity, as we know it, wouldn't exist as most of the advancements in our progressive technology have come from the corporate sector. However, keep in mind that these same advancements were not the goal of business; they were a byproduct of their search for increased profits. Take, for example, the large drug companies who we increasingly rely on to find cures for our diseases. Do you believe it is coincidence that what they regularly discover is not a cure but an ongoing treatment... necessitating the purchase of their proprietary drugs, in many instances, for the rest of your life?

The goals of business are not the goals of people, and business must be regulated to align with what's good for society as a whole. Too often we are being told the story from the other way around and life gets very messy as we try and align society's goals with what's good for business.

To put this argument into perspective, you might say that whereas socialism is based on redistributing wealth downward on the basis of need; capitalism is based on redistributing wealth upward on the promise of increased wealth for all. Both approaches abuse the free market, which is not to judge them good or evil, just to simply to state a fact.

The reality for government in most industrialized countries, and all democracies, has been that they must, as a political necessity, combine both capitalism and socialism in their policies.

Governments design economic policies to facilitate the raising of capital and to promote business growth. They regulate to increase competition for business efficiency. At the same time, they collect taxes to provide infrastructure and to provide social programs. In relation to that, they also create and enforce laws regulating the health and safety

aspects of business because the cost of looking after the victims of corporate greed would become too onerous, or lead to civil unrest, if none existed. The economic policy variations between industrialized countries is now more a matter of degree and not of fundamental ideology. No modern democratic country wants to see the disabled, the very old, or any other unemployables, starving and dying in their streets, and all recognize that pure socialism can't exist because human beings achieve more following the lure of progressive incentives.

The questions arising from this circumstance, and facing modern governments in one mode or another on a daily basis, concern which compromise between capitalism and socialism is the best fit. How much redistribution of wealth can exist before we inhibit our incentive to be a productive member of society? And, at the other end of the spectrum, how much wealth is needed to create the brass ring we are all supposed to reach for and, by doing so, create opportunities for prosperity?

Under one guise or another each and every government weighs and measures these questions daily, testing and retesting, tinkering with its policies in whatever way its assessment of the trends takes it. What it shouldn't do is spend time attempting to fit nonsensical labels like socialism and capitalism, or liberal and conservative, to these policies, along with their extreme philosophies. These endeavors are in the realm of pure rhetoric, and best left to politicians seeking attention who need to create heroic ideals they can stand in favor of, and evil bogeymen they can stand tall and strong against.

Chapter 21

The Under Appreciation Of Overpopulation

Apparently, it's not cool these days to talk about the "population explosion". We wore that term out when rock singers were still wearing polyester pants.

The idea of too many people was confusing even then. We saw great empty spaces all over the world and shook our heads in disbelief when a few scientists dared talk about overpopulation. Forty years ago, the "doom and gloom" folks said we could never produce enough food for eight billion people yet; we do, and still waste lots of it. Not every one gets fed but that's a distribution problem; the productive capacity exists. As one of my favorite Economists was fond of saying, if times were really tough there would be potatoes growing in front of people's houses instead of grass.

Food problems aside, both the arguments made for, and against, population growth are strong. Where they take us is what I care about. First, I need to set the stage by inundating you with a collection of facts. Please bear with me; I really did try to leave the boring and confusing ones out.

According to the World Bank the Earth's human population reached one billion in 1805, two billion in 1926, three billion in 1960, four billion in 1974, five billion in 1987, and six billion in 1998. Since then the Earth's population has gotten to just about eight billion. In other words, it took 121 years to add the second billion, 34 years to add the third, 14 to add the fourth, 13 to add the fifth, and 11 to add both six and seven billion. The World Bank also predicts that the Earth's population will reach 9.1 billion by 2050. That assumes a decline in the world birth

rate due to better education, improved worldwide prosperity, and more freedom for women to participate in family decision making. Those factors are what impacts population growth and, praise be, it's already happening.

In the short-term war, disease, and various other disasters are always lurking in the shadows to affect the growth rate, but they haven't impacted it very much to date. If the World Bank's projections are correct, and they are conservative estimates, that would mean our population took from the dawn of homo sapiens existence (250,000 years ago, give or take) until 1960 to reach 3 billion and that in the following 90 years it will have more than tripled to over 9 billion. We are already most of the way there. If you have even a rudimentary understanding of economics you will recognize that imbedded in these figures are a host of major upheavals.

The most startling fact to me is how this massive growth in our population is taking place almost exclusively in the developing world. The richest countries have a population growth rate that is virtually non-existent. In other words, in the most developed countries, like ours, on average two adults produce two children, which is simple replacement. Our populations are already educated, prosperous, and women are free to make their own decisions, so our growth rate has stabilized... except for immigration. We have a policy of bringing people into our countries and continuing to grow our populations for a variety reasons, mostly economic, but that is another topic. The less developed countries haven't reached this position so they are still pumping them out, with better health care to keep them alive. Whatever our feeling is on this reality and regardless of where they arrive on this planet they are still human beings – giving them just as much right to the resources of this planet as we have. So says the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, upon which we signed.

These numbers I have just thrown at you are eminently supported facts. Whether we accept them as threats to our future health and prosper-

ity seems to be a function of personal ideologies. Simply stated, those who envision this level of population growth as a guillotine hanging over our heads believe there are far too many people on Earth now, and those who see it as a boom in economic opportunities believe our species can, and must, continue to grow forever. Any surplus can be sent to colonize outer space or the bottom of the oceans. Those are the opposite poles in this argument but most of us will choose a position somewhere in between, depending on how we decide whose facts are true and whose are the most relevant.

To facilitate this decision, the first major hurdle in understanding the scope of the problem comes in confronting the concept that overpopulation is not a problem of elbow room, as is often portrayed in the visual media. It is a question of resources. When a television show talks about population growth we invariably are shown telephoto images of people compressed into some downtown city core like Hong Kong, Tokyo, or Manhattan, with the implication being that this is what humankind has to look forward to. This image is false and distracting. Long before we would arrive at such a situation we would be faced with enormous resource depletion challenges.

Until just recently 25% of the world's population was using 75% of its resources. That's us, by the way, we are the hogs. Thanks to a technological revolution in worldwide communications the rest of the world now sees in digital detail through television and internet how extravagant and lush our existence is, compared to theirs... and they want in. Couple these amazing revelations with the almost world-wide collapse in the promotion of Marxist and Communist ideologies, and a recognition of free enterprise economics as the way to prosperity, and you have a near wholesale acceptance of the Western lifestyle, more specifically, the American lifestyle, as the goal of humankind.

The positive aspects of this situation, particularly concerning homogeneity of purpose and values, and the spreading of egalitarian and democratic principles, does little more than mask the depth of conflict.

The eight-hundred-pound gorilla has just decided it wants what we got, and there may not be enough to go around.

The remaining 75% of the world wants to own their own home, drive their own car (or two), live in a modern house with TV's, internet, microwaves, carpeting, central heating, air conditioning, closets full of clothes, (and shoes), and all of the other goodies and toys that we see as our present entitlement.

Simple mathematics indicate that, if this is the case, industrial production will have to increase 300-400% translating into a similar increase in the need for raw materials. Logging and mining would have to triple their output, energy in all its form as well. It means three to four times the number of productive mines, productive forests, productive oil and gas wells (or coal mines), along with their accompanying mills, smelters, refineries, transportation networks and final product manufacturers and distributors. Sounds like quite a boom. And it is; it's been on for a couple decades now. China, India, South East Asia, parts of South America, have seen incredible economic growth in the past generation. They grew so fast that they threatened the economic viability of Western nations until the global financial crisis suddenly slowed things down a bit. But that doesn't change the realities. India alone now has a middle class of almost 400 million people, less than half of their population but a larger middle class than all of North America, and they are working even harder to bring everyone to a higher standard.

In the meantime, we haven't identified enough resources to make up for this growth so we've experienced an incredibly volatile commodity's market in recent years. Oil, for instance, jumps up and down like a yo-yo depending on everything from hurricanes in the Gulf to refinery fires and tensions in the Middle East, leading to prices that can double in a six-month period and halve in the next six months. On a lesser scale it's the same with copper, aluminum, steel, and more or less every basic commodity, including gold, which goes up in price as people lose faith in paper money.

Even the cost of grains are going up because corn production has gone toward making ethanol as a cheaper substitute for oil while other grains are being substituted for corn, creating shortages which raise their prices – and this isn't a blip in our economic forecast, it is our economic forecast. The blip was our worldwide credit crunch, which led to an economic downturn and is now going away because that is what the whole world wants and is willing to work toward. Except that it's leaving China, India and the Asian Pacific Rim countries even better off than before – in relation to Western societies – and having more economic power and more demands to make on us. And if productivity can't keep growing at the same pace, which may only occur through some miraculous technological innovation, then our endangered Western lifestyle will diminish at an even faster rate.

We've been pigs at the trough and it was grand while it lasted, at least for us, but the time is coming when we may have to share. Sharing means changing our values – downsizing – and we are not a population that accepts this kind of change easily. What may be even more distasteful is the way it will happen... in spite of us. The power shift in the world is already happening. The center of the earth is moving East very quickly and concepts like Western entitlement based on the propaganda of greatness do not trade well in a weapons-of-mass-destruction environment. Western nations ability to bully, or buy, a special place in the world for themselves is fading. Eighty million people are being added to the world population every year and they all live somewhere else, and they all want their fair share of a shrinking pie.

Societies survive a changing environment with their ability to adapt. Some people believe we have the power to control this situation, to stay at the top of the pyramid. What they refuse to understand is that the pyramid is the problem. Our western need to rank everything in accordance with wealth creation and accumulation is what we need to change. Our values are skewed and we need to embrace a different view of the world beyond our borders.

Are we capable of that level of change, of that level of transformation in our economic and cultural ideals? I don't know, but a good indication will be available through the kind of leadership we choose to take us into that future. We need leaders with the vision and courage to treat us like adults and not children, even though we may have been acting like children by ignoring problems, or demanding that someone make them go away. We need leaders who will say what needs to be said and work toward means of coping instead of telling us what we want to hear. Volatility will be the new order, flexibility, patience and understanding an absolute requirement, and global co-operation the answer to most problems. Welcome to the future.

Chapter 22

Shrinkage Shock

The much maligned but heavily depended upon World Bank has made a startling forecast. Between 2050 and the end of this century, after the world population has peaked at somewhere between 9 and 10 billion, all population growth will cease. Humanity will have hit the wall; reached a stasis point. Considering our present rate of fruitfulness, adding 70 to 80 million new souls every year, it appears the brakes will be coming on very rapidly and, with it, a few startling twists and turns to humanities view of the future.

Now just wait, you subliminally interject based on an inspired moment of recall. Throughout my previous chapter on “Overpopulation” I incessantly moaned about the growth rate; how fast the world was adding people and what kind of pressure this was putting on our finite resources – as well as on our political systems. I also opined that western attitudes must adopt a new understanding more in line with the weakening of our dominant position in the world; as wealth and power shift toward countries like China, India, and other eastern nations – and I complained that this power shift, in conjunction with improvements to world wide communication technology, pose a threat to our traditionally “favored” status (as power brokers and hogs at the trough).

Won't these issues bite the dust when the pressure from rapid growth ceases to exist? No, is the unfortunate answer. When all is said and done, 9 to 10 billion people will still be demanding an equal share of a pie that has, over generations, been appropriated by less than a quarter of the world population. Therefore, severe shortages and battles over distribution won't evaporate – back to the topic at hand.

Incredibly, the World Bank has been predicting this halt to population growth for over thirty years. You might believe such a revolutionary event would garner front-page headlines, except that researchers present it in so understated and bureaucratic a manner as to make it hardly comprehensible. And they further obfuscate their conclusions by including a group of other possible scenarios which they suggest are less likely but they throw them in anyway, so this vital gem of information disappears into that great accumulation of bland academic statistics stored in thousands of data bases all over the world – seldom referenced except by diligent (and equally bland) social science types.

As I stated in the previous chapter, more than a generation ago studies funded by the World Bank concluded that increased education, growing world wide prosperity, and more freedom for women to participate in family decision making, were having a significant influence on the birth rate. Indeed, most wealthy nations had already reached a zero (or sub zero) growth rate as a result of these factors. In stable economies two adults, on average, produce two children or less, which is bare replacement. At present over 70 countries are in such a position.

As a result, population growth in western style nations is now directly dependent on immigration. In developing nations, where virtually all worldwide population growth is now occurring, these conditions do not exist, as yet. However, increased health care, the availability of birth control, and a weakening adherence to the demands of religion are beginning to be felt... and pressures exerted by the globalization of economic activity, and the liberalization attitudes of the worlds leading trade nations, are accelerating this change.

For what it's worth, I personally can't see many of these second and third world nations permitting the conditions believed to stabilize population growth happen without some form of brutal conflict, especially in nations where fundamentalist religions are a major force. But this world-wide stabilization is predicted – and to witness this happening within the lifetimes of children now in school, makes it a real mind bender.

The World Bank doesn't go into detail on this subject, other than to promote the very real positive aspects trending in this direction, but they do ominously hint that having the population slowdown extended

to every corner of the planet may happen “out of necessity”. In other words, with nine to ten billion individuals clamoring for resources, wealth distribution problems may create more anger, and desperation, than some nations are capable of managing. If you factor in the accessibility of potentially dangerous weapons technologies, which are appearing on an almost daily basis, it becomes difficult to downplay the possible threat.

What appears to be implied is that we may simply find a way to stall population growth rather than undergo the stress and unpredictability associated with widespread conflict. The flaw in this argument, as history has shown, is that in desperate times the power to distribute resources is often usurped by political leaders – and their personal agenda’s – which could take us in any number of directions.

For the sake of argument let’s assume an enlightened outcome. We’ll imagine a world where population growth comes to a screeching halt during an era of visionary leaders and skilled, selfless, communicators, who are able to negotiate compromise at the behest of a willing and co-operative world citizenry. (Sunshine, flowers-always-in-bloom, gentle breezes... you get the picture.) Where does that leave us? First of all, as a western style democracy with population growth totally dependent upon immigration, it leaves us facing a revolutionary change.

At present our economy is increasingly affected by how well we balance the number and the quality of people we let in. Western countries seek both poor immigrants to act as cheap labor – keeping labor-intensive industries competitive – and wealthy business and professional people looking for a more stable lifestyle – to become our new entrepreneurs and investors. It’s been the best of both worlds and we’ve used this advantage to pick and choose as our needs dictated. What will happen when we move from the comfort of this reality to one where we compete for immigrants as a scarce resource? And this will be taking place in a world where, (wait for it – it’s pivotal), population stasis is nothing more than a fleeting moment in time, as the world population actually begins “shrinking”. I know how strange this sounds. For thousands of years we have been experiencing an expanding population, particularly over the last couple of generations – but it is coming to an end.

The birth rate per couple in Canada is 1.6, Japan 1.2, Germany 1.4,

Portugal 1.5 – France and the United States at 2.0 and 2.1 are at bare maintenance, and even India, which used to be a favorite example of the population explosion has slowed from 3.4 to 2.7, in just the last fifteen years.

This sudden shift in population pattern isn't obvious yet in developing countries because other factors are at work. India, for instance, has also seen its infant mortality rate decline from 75 deaths per thousand to 49 per thousand in the last fifteen years which is a huge change when you understand that there are 25 million births per year in that country... and they have also seen their life expectancy increase from 60 to 66 years over the same period bolstering their population at the other end of the spectrum. It takes more than a birth rate to reduce population but cultures are changing all over the world in ways that promote freedom of choice and long-term security, and this impetus is shifting momentum away from large families.

When people enjoy a wealth of choices and future opportunities, as a result of living in a more prosperous nation, they seek stability in an effort to protect what they have. If you have nothing, you have nothing to lose, (One of my favorite sayings), and the more you have the more you are willing to sacrifice to maintain your lifestyle.

Having large families is one thing we appear willing to sacrifice in an effort to maintain a lifestyle with increased freedom of choice; and when enough individuals are given this choice, populations stabilize, including the population of the entire world. But as the rest of the world gradually hits 2.0 (actually 2.1 children per couple is considered bare maintenance), countries like Japan, Germany, Canada, Portugal, and others in the future whose birth rate is below replacement won't get their extra people... unless somewhere else is losing them. Therefore, obviously, once the world population hits that historic peak plateau we are going to begin shrinking. The downward momentum is already beginning and there is nothing to keep us at stasis once we achieve it.

“Fabulous!” will be the response from many people; finally, we can work at true sustainability with an honest grasp of future demand but, as we all know, every silver lining brings along its dark cloud.

Much had been written about the “No-Growth Society” and the “Sta-

tionary State” even though these events have only ever occurred within fixed borders, never on a worldwide scale. Nonetheless, for hundreds of years a bevy of experts have pondered the various possibilities of “static growth”, (an oxymoron in anything but the study of economics), extrapolating the effect of these circumstances on all human society... often with jarring results. The father of modern economics, Adam Smith, thought a stationary state would be “dull” while John Stuart Mill disagreed and believed it would have some vibrancy. The people of my generation listened while Kenneth Boulding introduced his concept of “Spaceship Earth” whereby our planet must be viewed as a spaceship hurtling through the Universe and only capable of survival if everything is recycled except the energy drawn from the sun. It’s all an interesting mind game when seen as off in the distant future. Now that the reality is facing our latest generation, such forecasts need investigation, debate...and solutions.

The dominant world value system is based on economic growth and most of this economic growth, literally for thousands of years, has been a function of expanding markets. It is no coincidence that much of the economic boom taking place during the last hundred years correlates very closely with the population explosion. At its peak, a hundred million new people a year creates considerable opportunities for entrepreneurs. So, what happens when it comes to a halt? What changes must we expect in a world where to gain a customer for your product means someone else loses a customer for theirs, a zero-sum society where for every new business that succeeds others must suffer.

The more optimistic economists say there will still be room for expansion but, undoubtedly, the expansion would be minimal compared to what we are used to. In this situation competition would necessarily become fierce and the costs associated with raising capital may become prohibitive as our concept of wealth is significantly altered. Land, the favorite item of speculators, ultimately increases in value as a result of the demands exerted by an expanding population. If the population isn’t expanding property may never go up in value again. Speculation has been based on a belief in future scarcity, engendering demand and bidding the value of an item upward. If the scarcity of land is greatly reduced, due to a shrinking population, values will stabilize or go down, and the massive infrastructures we have created to raise capital will not

be as vibrant.

The stock and commodities markets, which have relied so heavily on speculation in the past for profit-taking opportunities, will hit a few major bumps... as will other financial institutions. Banks make their money from lending our savings to people who wish to invest in substantial goods, particularly property – a much scarier proposition in a shrinking market. In fact, the more pessimistic economists predict that as we approach the stationary economy instead of inflation being the bogeyman we may shift to deflation as our prime economic motivator with speculators trying to gauge how far downward values will be bid.

Changing styles and trends will continue to increase some values, as will scarcity, but the “rising tide lifts all boats” concept that flourishes in equity markets will see a strong curtailment, or reversal. The tide is turning, the population bubble is finally bursting, and predicting values and market movements will no longer be an extension of past experience. Unprecedented events will create an atmosphere of greater confusion and risk.

Governments at all levels will be faced with extreme challenges. Virtually every municipal government expenditure is funded through a tax system related to the value of fixed property. Reduced property values would necessitate either a higher tax rate to maintain cash flows or reduced cash flows and therefore reduced services. (It’s actually more complicated, and severe, than that because municipalities presently use the taxes from newly constructed areas to finance the maintenance of older areas so a reduction in growth has an even greater impact.)

To a certain degree our wages are also impacted by speculation. Increased competition in the shrinking marketplace would bring about lower profit margins and less money to spread around the entire economy. Lower wages are traditionally the first effect of an economic downturn, and they would be impacted even more in this situation because certain industries, based almost entirely on economic growth, such as construction, would face large scale cut backs... and, it follows, when wages go down so do income and sales tax revenues.

This revolutionary shift from incredible population growth to a shrinking population, happening so quickly and bringing with it unpreced-

ented economic confusion, will put governments under a great deal of pressure to smooth out the highs and lows, and maintain as much stability as possible. A stationary economy may appear more in the form of the “managed capitalism” foreseen by socialist economists like Robert Heilbroner, as opposed to the free enterprise capitalism of the neo-classical economists... a possibility that strikes fear in the heart of capitalists everywhere.

In geologic time this event will appear to have happened in the blink of an eye but people being born today will be living it. To move from adding one hundred million new people a year, every year, which was the case just recently, to facing a future where the World population will shrink, every year, all within one lifetime, can't help but involve major societal changes. The process has already begun and the slowing growth rate is already well documented. Unfortunately, national governments have a poor history of even recognizing, let alone preparing for, major world events – climate change, holes in the ozone layer, dying oceans, nuclear proliferation, pandemics – politicians would rather stick their head in the sand and grasp at whatever straws of information deny reality.

Admittedly, while presently battling resource depletion problems brought on by unprecedented population growth it is hard to focus on problems associated with a shrinking population. Still, if nothing else, we should recognize that a few immediate challenges are facing us – particularly in the realm of immigration, climate change, and national debt reduction – which need to be examined in the face of these World Bank predictions. Policies put in place to deal with an oversupply of people and an unlimited potential for industrial growth may very soon come back to haunt us in a world of where, every day, there are fewer people in the world than was present the day before.

Section Six

Legalese

These are tough essays to read, even tougher to write because of the complex ideas. Tackle them if you wish, or leave them, as is your right, but I spent many hours trying to make these multi-layered notions comprehensible. I just don't know if I succeeded.

Chapter 23

Laws: Old and New

Governments exist to provide for the people. It's true, regardless of how remote a concept it may appear at times, and one method governments use to accomplish this goal is by writing and enforcing laws. I could illustrate this statement by demonstrating that societies without laws do not survive, but that would be a waste of time because no such thing has ever existed, or ever could. There have always been laws.

Laws are not a modern or even a civilized concept; animals have laws – just no court systems. Human laws differ in their goals and complexity. It's a consequence of our long physical maturation process and our vulnerability during childhood development. Individual humans need lots of time to become self-sufficient and it doesn't happen without a security blanket. More specifically, without help from other human beings. The females of our species have always required special protection during and after pregnancy as they, and their newborn child, are extremely fragile. Human children, although born with very large brains, develop slowly and require education and training to achieve their potential. If no social order existed to provide protection during these years human society would have ceased to exist, or never have existed at all.

In nature, laws exist to create an ordered system and an ordered system promotes the survival of each species. If one animal sets out to steal another's food, or mate, or kill its offspring, they must be prepared to outfight or outrun their competitor. If they don't have that ability, or they blindly wander into another animal's territory, or fail to respect a traditional enemy, they may end up paying with their life.

Whether their brain is the size of a pea or a watermelon every animal understands that all actions have consequences, which impact their survival. Simply stated, in their most basic form, laws are no more than statements of what must happen if we are to exist.

When our species hunted and foraged in the jungles we were constrained by those same laws, but when we evolved into a state of civilization our relationships became more complex so we had to expand our laws. Civilization is not a natural state. It has only been around for ten thousand years in a world that is billions of years old. Indeed, much if not most of the trouble within our society may be derived from trying to deal with situations where our genetically implanted programming conflicts with our culturally derived intellect; our animal nature versus our civilized nature.

In an effort to overcome this conflict, to bring order to the chaos we call civilization, we created complex codes of conduct, sometimes referred to as morality or, more recently, as values, which define our activities. We continually judge right from wrong based on how our activities impact others, and from this we have created both laws and punishments to deter those we believe cross that line.

To help with enforcement some groups have promoted the idea that laws are imposed by God, but this is more an act of faith than reason. When Moses came down from the mountain carrying the Ten Commandments they didn't say thou shalt not commit murder, adultery, theft, or be envious, or dishonor your parents or your God, etc. simply because God decided this was the right time to encase morality in stone. These taboos were already well established, along with many others. Civilization would not have survived to that point if each individual had to expend their productive energies constantly defending themselves against these crimes and passions.

Without mutually agreeable rules we would never have had the time to grow fruit and vegetables and tend our domestic animals as we emerged from the equatorial forest. Even in a pre-civilized environment those same Ten Commandments had to exist in some form because a "might makes right" ethic where each person must look to their own survival

every moment of every day is just too demanding to give a progressive childhood room to exist.

In effect, our concept of law could be characterized as having always been nothing more than an expression of collective rationality, a society wide perception of the difference between right and wrong where right promotes the survival of our species and wrong threatens it.

As societies grew in size they also continued to grow in complexity, beyond simple age and gender role differentiation. Each individual was still expected to contribute to the welfare of the group, but the sheer number of people created by the success of civilization placed demands on each individual far beyond supporting the growth and protection of family. Our roles expanded and specialized to fill the needs of much larger groups. Societies changed rapidly as civilization multiplied, so rules and enforcement mechanisms had to be created covering newly evolving situations.

Despite conflicts in scale, everyone fundamentally concedes that laws are needed to define our roles and enforce our transactions. Civilization continues to be founded on both role differentiation: buyer/seller, employer/employee, adult/child, citizen/alien, etc. – and peaceful, mutually beneficial, transactions – exchanging one skill or resource for another. In theory, a government's most contentious tasks arise from balancing how many, and what kinds of laws, are necessary, where having too many laws denies freedom, and having too few promotes anarchy.

You may not be able to measure the loss of freedom by the sheer number of laws, as laws are what make freedom possible, but bad laws do exist, and the standard they are measured against is the long-accepted criteria of judging whether they conflict with our definition of morality. Unfortunately, in light of this growing complexity within our society, deciding whose interpretation of morality is the right one has become a very political decision. I say “unfortunately” not because I object to the idea that the political arena is where those determinations should be made, but because many (perhaps most) modern politicians do not exemplify the concept of morality.

What has evolved through many successes and failures is a system

where, at the present time, morality, or values, can be broken into two, often conflicting, classifications – primal and cultural – based on where they originate.

Primal, the oldest morality, is the one rooted in collective rationality. As I said earlier, before the advent of civilization, what worked to help us survive as a species was defined as right, and what threatened our survival was defined as wrong.

Subsequently, since the growth of civilization, we have added cultural refinements to these values as a means of compensating for our more divergent social lifestyles. It is in these cultural values, rooted in our adopted differences, where most problems arise.

Increasingly, our cultural values are brought into conflict with our primal values as we face situations where our “need” to preserve cultural differences threatens basic survival.

I know this is dragging out and may be confusing but let me try an example. The concept of racial superiority has been popular for millennia and throughout that period various political and religious leaders have advocated enslaving or eliminating other races... beginning with the ones who are the most obviously different from them. It was usually an easy sell to their citizens for a host of reasons. However, what this process ignores is that variability is crucial to the survival of all species. The more we are different from each other the more we are likely to survive as a species, if an unexpected crisis arises. It could be a natural disaster like disease, climate change, or meteors striking the Earth, or it could be a man-made disaster like war and rising toxicity in the environment. A high degree of homogeneity makes us much more vulnerable to species extinction, yet, our cultures promotes conformity and similarity.

Primal values are what work; it is the rules we live by distilled from the success of living. According to our primal values immoral activity is any activity that jeopardizes humanity’s survival. Therefore, if laws support or promote humanity’s destruction than they are immoral regardless of how long they have been part of our culture. First and foremost, laws must support our continued existence.

Meanwhile, virtually every nation displays a desire to sanctify and en-

trench their cultural differences, fixing values at a point in time. However, time moves on and new conditions bring new threats to humanity and, as a result, we require new values and a new morality to combat these threats. It's not just ancient stone tablets causing the problem either. Modern societies are forever enshrining their laws in a constitution or legal code making them sacred and almost impossible to update – and this cultural conservatism inhibits us from re-examining concepts in the light of a changing physical and social environment.

Sanctifying morality makes it difficult to understand that what worked to promote the survival of a past society may be harmful to the survival of a modern society. At a time when changes took centuries to occur, worshipping the past more than the future was manageable. But at a time when societal upheavals happen almost daily, the future must take precedence over the past. Primal values must take precedence over cultural values.

Take, as another example, laws that protect the institutions of marriage. For hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, female adultery was punishable by death. In some corners of the world it still is. The contractual union of one man and one woman has been recognized as providing the best environment for producing and rearing children, and not to protect it intensely was believed to threaten social stability. The man, being the physically stronger of the two, took on the role of enforcer in the relationship, and applied the rules as he saw fit. But what happens to this relationship in a world where there may already be too many children, and producing more is no longer a societal requirement? What becomes of marriage?

Almost imperceptibly over the last few generations our collective rationality has been modifying marriage to focus on the relationship between the two adults, and children are becoming a secondary consideration – an option to be determined at a later date, or maybe not at all. A by-product of this collective decision has been that women have used the time and energy they would have spent raising children to enter the workforce, and by doing so they have gained individual worth beyond their worth as home makers. Now it is unacceptable for a man to punish his wife for doing anything the man interprets as destructive to the family. Families are now partnerships where the rules are open to discussion and mutual agreement, and if too many disagreements

persist than marriage breakup is a viable solution. Yet, many people won't let go of the old values where marriage was a male-dominated holy union for the propagation of children – and birth control, divorce, and choosing not to have children were all crimes against society.

Those resisting change evidently believe that holding onto the laws of the past will keep society from changing, but society has always, eventually, responded more to present needs than past rules. We are a changing society struggling to live by rules that many are afraid to change. Our debates are less about the quality of change than whether it should take place at all. We have polarized into “camps” labeled as liberals who seek to change values, and conservatives, who oppose change and wish to extrapolate the past into the future. Primal values are the easiest to ignore because they sacrifice the here and now for future security – witness the Climate Change debate. Cultural values are based on lies, but they are comforting lies, and they generally gain widespread appeal by ignoring the overall picture in favor of narrow but comforting fantasies. Unfortunately, living these fantasies may leave us unprepared for future threats to our existence.

Chapter 24

Free Will and the Law

Whether we choose primal or cultural values to construct our future is a direct result of how we are educated – but it is still our choice. We can't blame it on the teachers. Each of us has a role to play in providing a more secure and satisfying future, and although most of us find these political questions too fuzzy to embrace, seeking refuge in ignorance is, at the very least, pure laziness and, at worst, blatant selfishness.

We are born into a world of civilized human beings and we are entrusted with the obligation to protect the lives of everyone else in our species. If it sounds like a heavy load it's because not everyone takes it on. Those who excuse themselves from this obligation leave the rest to carry their share. In doing so they are failures as human beings.

Throughout history many leaders have offered to lift that responsibility from our shoulders and too often we have given them the privilege. With it they took our ability to be responsible, and they used it to concentrate power in structures where the primary task was to protect and enhance the lives of only a select few.

If you avoid knowledge because it will burden you with responsibility, if you accept that others, above and beyond the rest of us – chosen by the hand of God perhaps – are to be given the ability to decide how your life should be lived, then you, too, are a failure as a human being. Every social animal ever born is entrusted with the welfare of all – and you can't complete that commitment as a blind follower.

I guess that states my position.

The concept of free will has been one of the great philosophical debates of all time. It's so old we don't even know when it began but, at the very least, it dates from the time when earliest philosophers started recording their ideas. The basis of the discussions have revolved around whether our actions are predetermined or not. Does God, culture, DNA, or some other circumstance control you – or do you make your own decisions?

For millennia philosophers and scientists have taken sides and argued over a swirling mass of minute details; all of it confused by religious beliefs, semantics, and a lack of reliable evidence. Since the advent of computers, and the greater ease of statistical analysis, much has been gained in the fields of social science but the controversy surrounding Free Will, which goes right to the heart of human nature and individual identity, remains unresolved.

What is clear is that without the ability to sneak into a person's thought process, and gauge their intent, we may never solve this mystery and, as a result, we are prevented from creating laws applying to everyone equally... and this creates a barrier to the founding principles of every democratic government. Clear as mud, I know, but let me try and explain.

Like many arguments in life it's about where you draw the line.

People are shaped by their physical and social environment – but we make our own decisions – but how we make those decisions is the result of everything we have ever seen and heard and felt – we are conditioned by what has surrounded us. Yet, to believe this means we have no control over our destiny. Our individual identities are no more than the sum total of our sensory programming. Are we just a higher form of robot – bio-robots – eating, breathing, excreting and reproducing – but still a slave to some form of external programming?

And if this is the case where does creativity fit in? As human beings, each of us has the potential to imagine something we have never before encountered – to have ideas that no one else ever had. Otherwise, there would be no such thing as original art, music, dance, design or, for that matter, solutions to new problems. All we would be capable of is repeating what we have experienced. Originality is pervasive in modern

life with new music, new designs, literature and various other art forms facing us everywhere we turn. We are all capable, at some level, of unique thought, which must certainly influence the choices we make.

But where is that line? Which of our decisions is determined by past programming, and which by our ability to envision a different future – and does it vary for each individual? If it does, the confusion in our social systems becomes immeasurable. Take, for example, the Justice system, which is the largest and most obvious example of this confusion.

To examine this aspect of our judicial system we must first acknowledge that the law has a long history of understanding the word “no”. If your defense in a criminal proceeding is that your parent, spouse, religious leader, boss, or fuehrer (it’s a Nuremberg War Trials thing), told you to commit a crime, and you did so, tough luck. In virtually all cases you pay the piper. You are responsible for making that decision – for not saying “no”.

However, when deciding whether a person is guilty of a crime the defense often brings out traumatic events in a defendant’s life, such as childhood abuse, or the humiliation of poverty, or the lack of parental love and guidance... and the relaying of these events can affect both jurors and judges.

We have compassion for those who suffered through no fault of their own and we make allowances for those who experienced injustice – but should we let a murderer go free because they endured a miserable childhood? Perhaps not, but we often reduce their time in prison and let people who commit lesser crimes walk away because of this defense. Were they preconditioned by their hardships to commit these crimes? Were they incapable of deciding differently? If we entertain even a “reasonable doubt” about the answer we are required to set them free.

Complicating matters even further is the relatively recent understanding that up to fifty percent of our personalities are built into our genetic coding. Should parents and grandparents be criminally responsible for their offspring? They not only contribute to the genetic makeup of their children but they are also responsible for the child rearing experience, which puts them in double jeopardy. Punishing parents may not be like-

ly but recently an Italian court shortened a murder sentence when it was determined that the murderer carried five genes linked to violence. In the United States over 200 cases exist where lawyers have claimed genetic factors in seeking a reduced penalty for their client. What's the old saying about parents and their children, "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree". It has a ring of truth about it, but far too many exceptions exist to allow it full credence. With many heinous criminals coming from good homes and so many wonderful people coming from broken homes we can't blindly follow such a generalization.

So, the hardcore criminal stands up in court and says, "It's not my fault. My family was criminal for generations. I came from a broken home where I was abused and I didn't inherit any creative abilities to help me envision a better life. The only law I grew up understanding was, "don't get caught". How could I have turned out any differently?"

Who is to blame in this situation, and we must determine blame to establish the degree of guilt – and to set the amount of penalty to be paid. If not, concepts like justice are reduced to pure theory with no application in real life. There must be blame and there must be a consequence for breaking society's laws.

Most societies accept that criminal blame is all about intent. If you committed a crime by mistake you may be stupid, ignorant, or clumsy, but you are seldom criminal. You could still have to suffer for your mistake and pay a hefty price, the victims of your folly will expect that, but you are not included in the same category as those who intentionally commit crimes. As a rule, your debt is civil, to the people you hurt, not to society.

On the other hand, when you claim to have no criminal intent because you lacked any understanding of what crime is, and you seek to prove it with a litany of stories and witnesses illuminating the tragedy and pain you endured as a child, is that an excuse and, if it is, is it a valid enough reason to exempt you from punishment or to soften your punishment? If so, how many get-out-of-jail-free cards should you get? And, regardless of whether you should be punished, does leaving you run loose endanger other innocent members of society and how could we justify that? These questions don't have answers. Not ones that we can agree on and codify into our laws, which is one reason why judges are given

such discretion within our legal system – much to the disappointment of ardent conservatives.

We are at a point in the evolution of our legal system where we have no fixed baseline to draw from. More specifically, we are living with a gap in our understanding of the human condition that has led us to believe the only civilized response to crime is to try and make allowances for individual circumstance.

Our system of justice is based on individual rights so how each individual perceives themselves, within the justice system, has now become a factor in how the system decides on whether they were capable of forming the intent to commit a crime.

Fortunately, in the vast majority of cases this is a simple task. Most criminals act out of greed or malice in such a way as to make it obvious that they hardly even consider the pain of others when they seek to commit a crime. Their goal is to satisfy their own needs. Still, the justice system gives them the benefit of the doubt to such a degree that the burden of proof in a criminal trial sits squarely on the prosecution and, thus, is skewed in favor of the defendant. Innocent until proven guilty; better ten guilty men go free than one innocent man be punished; these are fundamental beliefs we have come to expect and honor in our justice system.

Imagine how frustrated people working within the justice system must become when they've gone through an investigation and found enough evidence to lay charges, and then successfully complete a trial, finally proving beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant committed the crime – and now they have to deal with the concept of free will before guilt is determined. Did they mean to do it, or were they programmed for crime by their past, or their genetic code? If they were programmed to commit crimes could they have exercised their free will and decided differently, or did they simply have no choice in the matter? If we believe that they had no choice what should be their punishment, if any punishment at all?

If no punishment is the decision how can we make society feel confident in the justice system and secure in their homes? Do we simply designate these individuals as human tragedies and throw them back

into the population, perhaps with some ongoing therapy on how to be a more responsible adult? Many people think so. Many other people think they should be just thrown into a prison and forgotten about but, practically speaking, prisons are incredibly expensive and no one wants their taxes to go up.

Judges and juries don't find a defendant "innocent"; they find them "not guilty". Innocence is a complex concept. Who is the more innocent, the victim of a property crime like car theft or break and enter, or the perpetrator who was a victim of self-centered, immoral parents who visited abuse, shame and poverty on their children, and we must decide because the innocent party is seen as the aggrieved party; the one who deserves priority and compensation in our socially progressive society.

Nevertheless, what is the impact on our system when we determine that the guilty criminal is more a victim than their victim, and deserving of less punishment than their victim had already suffered. Faith in the system is weakened because our black and white understanding of justice is weakened. We then ask: "What is the goal of our legal system anyway; is it universal justice or is it protection of the individual?"

If it is protection of the innocent than free will hardly applies because the only relevant questions then becomes, "Will they do it again?" If we are convinced they won't, we just cut them loose. If justice is the goal than we expect punishment of the offender and we are back into the murky stuff.

We want simple. Life has become so incredibly complex that finding a safe place to live is difficult and we all want badly to feel safe. It's one of the cornerstones of human nature. We need a large measure of security to enjoy our lives. Unresolved debates about free will leave us uncertain over the quality of justice within our legal system and that translates into a lack of faith in our governing system as a whole. We need more clarity. The concepts may be muddy and confusing but the outcomes must be justifiable.

Conditioning, individuality, responsibility, intent, blame, punishment, innocence, and free will must remain as part of our system but so must confidence. If we lose that, we lose the glue that binds us together as one community and once that is gone we lose both trust in our system

and security in our homes, creating all manner of stress in our lives.

At this point we still believe we have a system better than most, and we still think our system should be extended across the globe for the betterment of all. But our system is evolving, still seeking better ways to provide us with security and justice, and part of that process means coming to grips with mysteries of human nature that may never be fully explained.

Chapter 25

Brain Train

The latest research on the human brain has turned up information I find simply amazing – and enlightening. Occasionally, in my meandering recreational reading I just happen across knowledge that fills a gaping hole in my personal understanding of life and, for me, a serendipitous article I checked out in a science magazine did exactly that... and it inspired me to learn more.

It appears that brains, unlike hearts, lungs and other organs, do not develop as one whole unit but each region of the brain must undergo its own distinct form of development. The prefrontal cortex, for instance, is the most recently evolved region of our brains – and where we see the greatest improvements between our brains and those of other primates. It's both the area that regulates moral behavior – our conscience – and, at least as significantly, it's where conscious decision-making is headquartered. You can well imagine that proper development of this region is vital to having a successful life. However, as new research is informing us, if we aren't trained in how to use it, we lose it.

Take the case of a child who has everything done for them, or is simply forced to follow a chain of strict rules; when a child's life is habitual, formulaic, or completely controlled by outside influences, the conscious decision-making part of their brain doesn't achieve its full potential. Similarly, in adults, if we stop utilizing the prefrontal cortex for a significant period, it weakens, and our decision-making ability is compromised. The way various regions of our brains react is comparable to muscles. If they don't get exercise they shrink and become flaccid, and if they do get exercise they grow and develop, increasing

strength, speed, and dexterity.

Basically, every area of our body that experiences increased activity reacts by demanding increased nourishment, whether in more blood flow to carry food and oxygen, or heightened nerve pathways to provide electrical energy and chemical catalysts... and the body responds to this increase by enhancing the active nourishment pathways. Muscle development is the easiest of these systems to observe but structural changes occurring within the brain, although on a smaller scale, are no less dramatic – especially when you understand how the range of potential growth in children between birth and physical maturity is open to variation.

The prefrontal cortex matures very slowly, and relies heavily on learning, with up to 50% of actual, physical, brain growth a direct result of learning. In the face of such a fluid degree of potential an incredibly heavy burden of responsibility is placed on the teaching skills of both parents and educators to stimulate this growth. The depth of knowledge and commitment brought to bear at this stage may determine a child's ultimate achievements and quality of life.

Your brain is an entire versatile system made up of many interrelated but functionally specific sectors, similar to the 600 plus muscles in your body, and like muscles, each area thrives on use, responds positively to training, and may suffer damage if overdeveloped in one area and underdeveloped in others. However, unlike muscles, changes in the brain are largely invisible and damage may show up in ways that, until recently, weren't attributed to poor training. New insights into brain development are emphasizing the importance of specific methods used for teaching children and how they effect childhood brain development.

Our bodies are controlled by electricity. Muscles contract or relax due to tiny electrical charges sent from the brain through the nerve tissues, and this makes everything happen, both conscious, like deciding which cereal to buy at the store, and unconscious, like breathing, pumping blood and digesting food. And our brains, being the focus for electrical energy, are where electrical circuitry has its greatest concentration. It has been said that brain cells differ from other cells in that they don't regenerate, so when you lose them they are gone forever, but that isn't entirely true or entirely the issue. The brain develops and changes

through its limited ability to grow new cells but more importantly by its ability to build and enhance electrical pathways between existing cells.

Neurologically speaking, the speed and facility for growth inherent in brain neurons and synaptic pathways is beyond what was imagined just a few years ago... and that forms the basis of its “plasticity”. It is the brain's ability to continuously create and restructure this complex, multi-layered, web of pathways that makes it substantially different from the rest of the body. Some brain cells shrink and go dormant while others revive and grow, all based on the changing patterns of use, and the subsequent growth of synaptic pathways between cells. The brain is plastic in that it is constantly undergoing a process of adaptation in response to the never-ending stimuli it receives and, both our conscious and unconscious choices, generate structural change in support of whichever regions of our brain are most in demand.

New electrical pathways are constructed and enhanced to facilitate changes in use, while other parts, not in use, are reduced in size and complexity... perhaps to make way for growth in more active areas. The space for brain development is, after all, limited by its hard-protective shell, and for those who believe the old myth about people only using 10% of their brains, its utter nonsense and displays how truly ignorant of brain mechanics most of us are.

This new concept in brain development might best be illustrated by examining learned behavior and one of the most powerful examples of a learned behavior is addiction. Everyone knows an addict of one kind or another with drugs and alcohol being the most recognized culprits, and if you are dependent on some form of either, or any other addictive substance or activity for that matter, research is showing that your brain is in the process of shutting down the prefrontal cortex and shifting more activity to a region in the unconscious or habitual part of itself... the dopamine receptor area.

Dopamine is a narcotic we manufacture within our bodies. It has a variety of uses from masking pain caused by injuries and thus allowing us to maintain basic survival functions, to creating the pleasure of an orgasm as a reward for procreation. Regularly accessing the dopamine region, over time, causes active control of your decision-making ability to shift away from the conscious rational area of your brain to the

unconscious “reward” or “feel good” part of your brain. Consequently, succumbing to an addiction of any kind such as tobacco, drugs, alcohol, food, gambling, shopping, or whatever, is achieved through suppressing that rational choice decision making part of your brain, the prefrontal cortex.

Addictive substances or activities aren’t rational choices; they are destructive choices, but in choosing these activities you stimulate the feel-good sensors in your brain, providing a momentary sensation of wellbeing. In other words, in an effort to feel good, your unconscious overrides the sensible decision-making part of your brain, seeking access to the dopamine receptors. Continuous activity in this region of your brain, and suppression of the rational decision-making region, eventually reduces your ability to be sensible, and increases your need to follow habitual activities even if they are blatantly destructive. Because your brain constructs more and better pathways throughout the areas of greatest activity the longer you persist in this activity the more difficult it will be, first of all, to recognize the need for change and, secondly, to bring about that change, because it will require a greater degree of physical and structural change inside the brain itself.

One particularly interesting discovery coming from this research showed up when scientists tested the theory that soft drugs lead to hard drugs. They found a strong correlation, but not the one most people think. It’s not soft drugs that are the big lure to being hooked on cocaine or heroine... its cigarettes. People who start smoking before their brains have fully developed are being unconsciously conditioned by their tobacco addiction to be more susceptible to further addictive substances and activities.

As you might expect, once researchers became aware of these brain realities they quickly began promoting the need to focus greater attention on rational choice decision making in early childhood, and their research expanded to the question: What enhances growth in the rational choice area of the brain, as opposed to the immediate feel good area of the brain? The answers are not as straight forward as some may believe, for a number of reasons. Issues include the relatively recent increase in the scope of addiction, its concentration in wealthier nations, and the discovery that combating the problem conflicts with culturally defined child rearing attitudes.

In evolutionary theory if you habitually make poor decisions you disappear without a trace (no DNA left behind), but in present day wealthy nations we protect young people, in particular, and adults to a lesser extent, from their bad decisions. Families and close communities ameliorate the destructive decisions of an individual in an attempt to promote change within that person.

In days long past (my youth), addiction was not a large problem because few people had the money needed to invest in that kind of behavior. It wasn't that we were substantially better decision makers. We simply had fewer options. However, now that children have greater wealth and more choices, the latest research tells us they must be specifically trained to avoid addictive behaviors. If they don't, they fail to build enough structure in the rational decision-making part of their brains.

It sounds absolutely basic and obvious, but it's not, because our culture has decided that childhood is a separate "state of being" and different rules apply. We have been taught to accept that it's okay for children to indulge in a series of feel good activities because we believe that childhood is a special time and they will outgrow their bad habits as they reach maturity. The fact is, they don't; at least not easily, and if they do it will be as a result of a long painful process, often at high cost to the rest of society.

To be fair, it must also be emphasized that adults with a history of making destructive choices are not write-offs either. Everyone is capable of changing their brain at any age; it just takes longer and more effort when existing physical structures developed in the brain have to be altered. Addicts can kick their addictions. With a level of desperation bordering on self-preservation and, ideally, strong support from people who care, a process of change can begin to regenerate that part of their brain which has been suppressed. It is a process that requires time and enormous dedication. The concept that it takes every waking moment, one day at a time, and involves continuous acknowledgment of the problem, and confession of past transgressions, is exactly the right message. There has to be that conscious, repetitive, ongoing, acceptance and confession in order to reestablish the self-monitoring and moral decision-making aspect of our prefrontal cortex. It can only come from deep within the individual. Other people can't make those decisions for you and bring about the required changes.

A child's brain, on the other hand, is still in that highly "plastic" stage. If they are trained to make rational, non-destructive decisions early in life it will be more difficult for them to make destructive choices later. If you wait too long, the region of their brain making the decisions will already have established a dominant position. Training a brain is not just about instruction. If you tell a child something is wrong and they agree with you it doesn't mean they are developing their decision-making ability. They must be put in positions where "they" decide, and reap the consequences, hopefully while still responsive to the judgment and influence of wiser parents and teachers. You can't simply teach them by telling them over and over. Formulaic activities take you in the exact opposite direction. You might as well get them to write hundreds of lines on a blackboard saying "I will never take drugs," or "I will not smoke." Children must be put in a position where they are encouraged to make rational decisions and discouraged from making feel good destructive decisions.

When you give a child lunch money will they buy the pop and chips or a bottle of water and a banana – now you begin to see how difficult this is – will they go for good nutrition or a sugar high? When they earn money will they impulsively rush out and spend it or will they keep it until something important is needed? These are the kinds of choices that channel brain development as it relates to, or away from, rational choice decision-making. If you are constantly making the immediate "high" inducing decisions at an early age than you are developing the unconscious dopamine receptor area of your brain and suppressing the prefrontal cortex, and the research tells us that the earlier in life you begin the addictive process, the harder it is to change.

Later in life, even when you consciously know change is necessary your unconscious brain will keep making destructive choices for you. Drugs and alcohol may be the famous examples but any activity that fires our dopamine receptors can lead to addictive behaviors. How many times have we all heard a smoker say "I know it's wrong and it hurts me but I just can't quit," or the obese person who tells you they know it's killing them but they can't stop overeating, or the habitual spenders who've maxed out their credit cards but can't stop buying unnecessary items. We are raising whole generations of these people. Obviously, the best time to take control is when the brain is still developing and

it's the responsibility of parents, especially, and society in general, to recognize and respond to this learning curve with consistency and, dare I say it, discipline. Good luck with explaining that to a kid screaming for candy

And Finally: Crossing Boundaries

Strengths and Weaknesses

In reading the above chapters, in whatever order, (some looked more fun than others) you probably noticed that I did everything but wave my arms and shout, trying to get people to understand that fundamental change is coming. A never-before-experienced stream of world events is around every corner, and whether change happens sooner, thanks to mutual co-operation among nations, or later, under duress, will be determined – believe it or not – by the way people like you and I view the problems.

It took the horror of two world wars to bring about the United Nations, and with it such concepts as a World Bank, World Courts, World Health and Trade Organizations, even a document called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As flimsy as these structures are in practical terms, they provide hope when viewing the many atrocities being perpetrated around the world.

There is a precedent involved. Those fragile documents were inspired by events happening many years ago when the founding fathers of the United States got together and signed a document declaring everyone equal under the law. It wasn't something they, as individuals, believed strongly in. Indeed, many who signed were slave owners. But the rhetoric proved powerful and citizens embraced it. Other countries were inspired and underwent revolutions based on those same statements. As a result, the entire world has since moved considerably closer to believing in individual freedom and equality. We still have a long way to go but when a singing group in Russia is jailed for making an anti-government video, protests erupt on the streets of major cities all over the

world. That's a good thing.

In spite of the progress we are presently living in an era of widespread anti-rationalism, which makes it difficult to elect the responsible, thoughtful, and caring, governments who are absolutely vital to our future well-being. Indeed, we appear never more than one or two charismatic narcissists away from a totalitarian system. Failure in this regard means our flawed governing apparatus allows our leaders to ignore our wants and needs in favor of fulfilling their own agendas. If we attempt to examine the full consequence of their actions by demanding access to information, or insist they provide rational explanations for their behavior, they may cite security concerns or, simply, refuse to make themselves available for questioning. If we ramp up our demands and organize our opposition, they may designate us as dangerous or anti-democratic and put us under covert surveillance. Political leaders have tremendous power. If they see their status being threatened they can use their bully pulpit to spread fear and panic, and then invoke special powers to control those who demand the transparency and responsibility they always promise.

If that sounds extreme to you it doesn't to me. Even in my so-called stable, boring, country of Canada I have personally lived through a period of martial law. In the 1970's Canada invoked the War Measures Act, suspending individual rights for the entire country, every citizen from sea to shining sea, because a few Quebec separatists resorted to violence as a means to achieve their goals. Fortunately, it was applied with a time limit. I say fortunately because history has shown that the longer martial law exists the harder it is to remove.

Modern humanity has a problem with leadership. It remains a mysterious concept for us. We seek out leaders and we follow them oftentimes without sensible justifications. Leadership appears to be one of those things where people say, "I can't define it but I know it when I see it," and, in my opinion, "No you don't".

P.T. Barnum supposedly lived by the premise "a sucker is born every minute" and in my long life I have never met anyone who could prove an immunity to being fooled. We have all been taken advantage of, more times than we are willing to admit, usually as a result of personal greed, vanity, or laziness. Human society has a long tradition of succumbing

to talented frauds – charismatic individuals who are capable of using our fears and desires to lead us into acts that embarrass, astound, even horrify us when looked at from the distance of time. Given the obvious personal rewards available to them, no doubt we will always be confronted by people who spend countless hours studying and developing the means to manipulate us, and the most successful become incredibly proficient at it. At times so proficient that when caught in the act their victims even refuse to recognize them as guilty.

This ability of con men (and women) to sidestep rationality and speak a more popular “truth” may place them behind a sales counter in a store, or a desk in an office building or, if they are truly successful, on a stage in front of a large audience. We invest our life savings with them, elect them to govern our lives, and pay them to get us close to God. It happens thousands of times a day and when it goes bad many turn a blind eye to what caused it. We apparently fall prey to false ideas and false information quite easily.

For some odd reason society refuses to provide us with the training, or the confidence – even a culture of good examples – to resist being suckered. We have never developed a tradition of demanding proof or, at least, reliable evidence that the information we receive has a basis in truth – and the root cause of this unquestioning nature may stem from an inherent flaw in our leading institutions.

As any leader well knows, to promote skepticism is to become its target, which is another way of saying that the pinnacle achievement of any leader is to create a population base that relies on blind faith – in them. Think about it. What leader or leading institution wants to govern a population of skeptics? Who, among those in power, wants a constituency that refuses to be ignored and demands explanations – and this attitude doesn’t just exist on a national stage. It percolates down through every level of politics and management.

How many of you, in twelve or thirteen years of public school, received even one class in how to avoid being lied to, or how truth is verified, or what is the criteria for believability, or even, what are the differences between fact and fiction? Authority figures, religious leaders, industry spokespersons, even parents talking to their children, routinely deny truth to avoid controversy. From an early age we teach children that

only some facts need evidence. Religion, for instance, needs no facts at all, only faith. We spend more hours in school learning how to sit quietly and do as we are told than on the value of critical thinking or how to examine veracity. Few students ever encounter concepts like cognitive dissonance, confirmation bias, apophenia, white hat bias, selective recall, cherry picking, belief perseverance, filter bubbles, the woozle effect, the Pollyanna principle, or the Dunning-Kruger effect? These are tools used to manipulate the truth and the people who do understand these concepts, and know how to use them, are capable of manipulating us to achieve their goals.

On the other hand, although we are never specifically trained to deal with frauds and con artists, we are all taught from an early age to have “faith” even when, literally, no evidence exists to support it. We are all encouraged to trust, sometimes absolutely, those who represent the important institutions in our life. Religious, government, cultural, even senior business and military leaders are treated to special rights and privileges above and beyond the rest of us. We are encouraged not to ask them probing questions because that would be insulting. So why is being a skeptic something societies frown on? Naysayers, party-poopers, negativists, and downers we call them – while those who rely on blind faith are held up as special – the good people of the world.

Virtually, from birth we are immersed in the greatness of our institutions – political, spiritual, and cultural, and, by strong inference, those who claim to represent them. They represent values we have been taught to honor and respect, even fight and die for if necessary. How could we so denigrate the magnificent heritage these people represent by calling into question their righteousness? How could we dare be so ungrateful by demanding proof of what they are saying, or by suggesting the system bringing them to power is deeply flawed? To silence us all they need do is begin recounting stories of our heroic figures who overcame insurmountable odds with the aid of superhuman abilities – and God’s special help – to provide a home for us in this great land, and we immediately understand what a travesty it would be to question their legitimacy.

Leaders become leaders by their ability to take control of our emotions and use them to create a reservoir of faith and trust. This is not to suggest that good leaders with altruistic goals don’t exist. But it remains

our responsibility to ask the tough questions so we may decide where they are leading us and why we need to go there. Emotions are too unreliable to be the deciding factor in how we are governed.

One other concept you should understand – did you know that studies of psychopaths have discovered that few of them ever resort to violence and many more of them exist in our society than most people imagine. Clinically defined psychopaths make up an estimated one to three percent of our population? That averages to one of every fifty individuals you meet. The research shows they seek powerful positions, have a drive to be winners, and have no conscience when it comes to hurting others to achieve their goals. They aren't wired like the rest of us and view empathy as a weakness... one they can use to their advantage. Also, they often present themselves as friendly, engaging, charmers, with above average social skills. From childhood they learn to play the role. A 2010 study by some of the most respected names in the field suggests that one in twenty-five corporate professionals are likely to have psychopathic tendencies. They also seem to be attracted to the fields of medicine and policing, and, of course, we have no idea how many end up in politics.

Divide, Conquer, and Create a Myth

Like most people I daydream about a better world. Unfortunately, it has to be a daydream because the conditions needed to make it a reality are far off in the distance. The most fundamental aspect of my dream is of a physical environment that is capable of sustaining us. After all, what's the sense of having a healthy social environment on a dying planet?

Once over that hurdle, the next step would be to see our spurious "us" and "them" delineations disappear. When looking at fearsome problems such as population densities, nuclear proliferation, racial and religious conflicts, global environmental abuse, systemic political corruption, poverty, pandemics, and the myriad of other threats the world faces, it appears they all require the same approach to finding a lasting solution. Humankind has to start thinking and acting as one people. This dream is almost beyond imagining – because the initial challenge involves sharing and nations don't share very well.

Sharing increases equality, promotes mutual respect, and reduces poverty, desperation, and anger. When there are huge disparities in the distribution of wealth – which nations often attempt to justify with expressions of entitlement based on system superiority, or claims of being “special” in some self-defined way, all you accomplish is to create a world full of enemies and a cheering section for those who seek to hurt you.

In blatantly simple terms, sharing involves rich nations giving to poorer nations, and that won't happen until individuals begin thinking on a global level. Sharing is not a mushy, tree hugging, air-headed, spoiled child, philosophy as is so often portrayed by those opposed. Strength and maturity are needed to become involved in such a process, and real determination to carry it through. If you want to follow an air-headed, spoiled child philosophy, keep going in the direction we are going and watch as our world changes to something less livable, while our rich western societies are blamed for causing most the world's problems – with some justification.

For generations, western governments enjoyed a policy of raping and pillaging the world's resources. Britain, France, Spain, Germany, Portugal, Holland, even tiny Belgium, were all colonial powers, and they are just a few of the European ones. Since the arrival of modern democracies, and the growing recognition of equality as a necessary human right, much has changed, but not each country's desire to hold onto their national superiority. Patriotism and nationalism remain a large part of our individual identities and the feelings of entitlement they generate are routinely used to justify all manner of unequal treatment, even while rushing to help others in times of crisis. Our nations blindly hold this contradictory world vision because we benefit substantially from policies of exploitation.

Being Rational

When 911 occurred, it was such an incredible shock. Watching it live on television was mind-altering to the point of transformational. A highly coordinated attack, of that magnitude, on American soil, by a tiny group of Middle Eastern Muslims; it was unthinkable. Al Qaida,

lead by Osama Bin Laden, who belonged to one of the great families of Saudi Arabia – traditionally a staunch American ally – claimed to be justified in this outrage because the United States thrust its arrogant, infidel, soldiers, complete with their anti-Islamic customs and rah-rah American attitudes, into the heart of the Muslim holy land.

And how did America reply to this attack? They began a war on terrorism, and after attacking and initially defeating the Taliban in Afghanistan they turned and attacked Iraq which had nothing to do with 911, and was indeed no great threat to America, but had the world's largest untapped oil reserves and a policy of not letting American companies anywhere near them. Is it so strange to imagine that young Muslims from all over the world then flocked to Iraq and Afghanistan to fight against American oppression and exploitation?

These are people who live in poverty and see riches beyond imagination when they watch western television. They also believe they are God's chosen and feel they are being robbed by a people who spit on their religion and their way of life... while they watch the wealth from their land being used to provide luxuries for people who appear to have no respect for anyone but themselves. Add to this, one of the great truths of life, which is, "when you have nothing you have nothing to lose," and you get people who line up to strap bombs to their bodies and walk into a crowd... and if one day those bombs contain more than conventional explosives it will no doubt be followed with even greater celebrations.

The flip side of this despair is, if you have something and the promise of a brighter future along with that something, you have a strong incentive to be cautious and peace-loving. What we need for humankind's survival is a worldwide society full of cautious and peace-loving individuals, and this won't happen until there is some form of shared wealth and mutual respect among all peoples.

Superpowers run the world. It's a hard fact to ignore. Most nations attempt to align themselves with one or more of these powers in an effort to gain security and prosperity for their citizens. For a small nation to try and stand alone in this world is a dangerous step and few make the attempt. However, forming alliances with the big guys doesn't mean we have to follow their leadership. They achieved their strength by

building strong nationalist sentiments within their countries and that, on definition alone, makes them adverse to a global outlook. Their highly ingrained value systems are too self absorbed and egocentric. “America first” is more than just a saying; it’s a way of life. Hundreds of years of inspired fine-tuning have turned America into an unassailable cultural fortress. Russia hasn’t been doing this as long but they have gotten very good at it, and China is catching up fast. As anti-American as those other superpowers appear, they pay the United States a great compliment because they have adopted American values and are trying to out-America the Americans.

The leadership for global co-operation has to come from somewhere else. Other societies must step forward and encourage people to speak the difficult truths. Humanity is awash in irrational cultural perspectives, and desperately in need of powerful organizations promoting value systems based more on the quality of relationships, than the accumulation of toys. Only when sharing with others can be seen as normal, and owning far more than you can ever use be regarded as odd or selfish, will security and peace become widespread. Protecting the future is far more important than protecting the past, and that can only happen when we begin tearing down the walls of national self-interest we have worked so hard to build up.