

Learning the Kind of 'Out' We Are

Written by Alex Baer

Monday, 31 March 2014 22:03

The ability to learn is Nature's way of keeping us from dying from the same thing, over and over again. Except that it works only for the species, not individuals, and only some of the time at that. Individuals are as free as ever, Nature says, to perish or be punished by almost any lame-brained, bone-headed thing we'd care to do.

The ability to learn may be fickle, appearing to pick and choose its candidates by invisible lot, or by some other means we mortals cannot detect. However much we ponder, mull over, and squint, in mid-thought, Nature still retains the ability to surprise.

Baseball, for example: For the first time, during opening day, an umpire's call was challenged, and then actually reversed, after a check with the demigod of lightning's offspring with electrolysis, known as Instant Replay.

This marks a profound moment in the annals of learning. It proves people can change, even when there's an out at stake **and** a crush of tradition in place. This is no small thing.

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(Speaking of normally slow learners: During my time in uniformed service, we used to sometimes jest that we were serving in an organization with a proud history -- 200 years of tradition, completely unhampered by progress. This sort of remark used to come up when we were dealing with two of the *other* most common experiences, aside from brushes with, and close escapes from, Unhampered Progress: hurrying up, only to wait in place, and speculating on the nature of the *SNAFU* of the day.

The civilian version of the former, which some of us adopted for a while after discharge, was *I got no time for patience -- I gotta hurry up and relax!*

The latter scenario,
SNAFU

of the Day, was with more questionable ingredients, and the immersion of many elements, sometimes us, in very deep, and very hot, water.)

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Learning can come slowly and painfully. It's not all congratulatory backslaps following insightful flashes. As disappointing as we humans can sometimes be in our social evolution, we're at least starting to keep a kind of log book on what's happening. There's no burst of answers as yet, but that's not stopped us from asking questions.

Here's the kind of question we're asking -- or should be, anyway: Which kind of *out* are we? Outsourced, Out of Stock, Out of Order, Out in the Cold, Out of Luck, or Just Plain Out? How many *outs* do we have left? How many *outs* in this game? And, are we playing Indoors or Outdoors, plastic carpet or real turf? And why is it the expression is *out of doors*, when there are very few doors to be found in Nature, which is itself almost always outside in the first place? How can you be out of doors when you're in a place not expected to have doors, anyway?

Clearly, I have to learn to start asking much better questions. My answers aren't worth a hoot. They keep boomeranging back to where I started. It's very mysterious. Tell you what I mean:

For example, it looks like we've outsourced Democracy to Chile. They just won a legal battle against Monsanto, which wanted to patent seeds. Farmers, women, indigenous communities pressured the government to do the right thing and support, not actively harm, small and mid-sized farmers. Now, farmers will not be dependent on agri-giants for seeds, but can use their ancestral seeds, and keep their farms, food, families, and future off the dinner plate of global forces. For now.

Good for them. They've struck a blow for Democracy -- the kind we used to have here, where government responded to the people, not to corporations, lobbyists, and the rich. See: Monsanto can mop the floor with us here, and write any law they wish. In Chile, a new center-left coalition was responsible for the momentary win against global forces.

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We used to have an active center-left coalition in this country, too. They were called Liberals. That was before America scooped out its brains and replaced its common sense, its own best interests, and the People's, with corporate welfare, corporate person-hood, money-as-speech and the right to buy elections... And so on.

It's looking like we've outsourced who we used to be. I am very pleased for the people of Chile. I am very sad for us, and about our 35-year love affair with the kind of conservatism that mangles and maims its young, fails to bury its dead, and will not stop until everything has passed into control from the People to corporations, cliques, and various arcane cabalas and cults -- and by the most immediate, corrupt, destructive means possible.

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The United Nations is releasing an update on climate change, the first such update in seven years. To those who trust in science, this is a big deal; to those who place their trust elsewhere -- in God, glory, or gold -- the report is evidence of an ongoing fraud.

There is a lot of money still to be made in fossil fuels, and allied industries. There is a lot of money to be *lost* in fossil fuels, and allied industries, if you stop. The burning of fossil fuels are largely to blame for our temperature increase and climate change. We're very slowly bringing up the temp in the pot of water for all of us frogs here on the stove.

Take a wild guess how the UN report news is being received by people with vested interests in the status quo, and by those connected with the money, and political power, from fossil fuels. And by those in right wing radio and teevee whose job it is to make money for themselves, and to entertain, and to play now-you-see-it, now-you-don't with the real facts, with the truth, with the reality of all us frogs on the stove.

Big (yawn) surprise. The UN news is not good, especially for the poor, and for Australia's amazing array of life at the Great Barrier Reef. It may soon be the Great *Barren* Reef. Then, the Great Barrier

Grief

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Which *out* is this that we're practicing now? Probably a lot of them, all at once, but my money's on Out of Our Ever-Lovin' Minds for the lead spot. Or, maybe Over and Out.

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The World Health Organization tells us that seven million human beings died in 2012 as a result of air pollution -- half from cook stoves. Elsewhere, concerns remain about temperature rise, and the thawing of methane-dense tundra, as methane is 30 times worse than CO₂, as far as its heat-trapping capabilities are concerned. Like the punch line in a bad joke: At least we have plenty of cook stoves and methane.

In March, we had a bumper crop of pollution stories, many of them about BP, who many properly believe, murdered the Gulf of Mexico and its residents on shore, and is still getting away with murder. BP wants to stop paying claims, saying the payout formula is too generous. Meanwhile, the US is allowing BP to bid on contracts again. Also: BP has another spill on its hands, this time at its largest refinery in the US.

Hiland Crude had an event, too, good for 34,000 gallons of spilled gunk from a busted pipeline in North Dakota. In Texas, 168,000 gallons of heavy tar-like oil was dumped in the Gulf of Mexico. Meanwhile, as we remember the 25th anniversary of the forever-nightmare called Exxon Valdez, a number of pipelines is snaking its way all over the U.S., even as we nod and consider guarantees and promises for no-spill scenarios for Keystone XL's line...

... from an industry who has *Spill* as its middle, last, and first name. These reports are only the tip of the oil derrick. For extra mind-curdling fun, add in the recent water poisonings in the U.S., fracking madness, and complete your imaginary (for now) trip to hell with Fukushima, Chernobyl, Three Mile Island, and let that pile of names cook inside your head a while.

Is it Far Out, what we do? Too Far Outside Our Minds to Even Believe.

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Humans learn faster if the outcome from actions arrives swiftly. Humans hardly learn at all when the consequences of their actions take decades or centuries to bloom. I'm thinking cigarettes here, for one. Or booze. Or fossil fuel.

I'm also thinking about torture, and the worthlessness of that revolting technique to extract data from victims who will say *anything* to make it stop, whether they have any information or not. I'm also thinking of decades and decades of reports which attest to the utter lack of value of torture in obtaining information. I am also thinking of Dick Cheney, who recently said he'd do it all again.

We'd probably go kill Iraq again, too, even though we've admitted that was something of a minor blunder -- *oops* -- part of a pair of them that has cost too many lives, and will cost 4 to 6 trillion dollars, before we're done.

I'm thinking about humans' endless capacity to not learn a thing.

I'm thinking about nuclear power, the magnificent genie that was going to be too cheap to meter -- until the genie refused to go back into the bottle. We ourselves seem to have gone back into the bottle though, if only to numb the pain and forget our energy dependencies.

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Want to hear a good one? We're on a planet that's 70% water, and no one's figured out how to harness wave or tidal energy. No one's putting up many wind farms on the remaining 30% of land. No one's trying out thermal, much. No one's going after solar and algae. No one's perfecting solar collection on 100% of the surface.

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Fun fact: Every second, 600 million tons of hydrogen are converted into helium at our sun's core, generating 4×10^{27} watts of energy. Every second, one helluva lot of thermonuclear devices are unleashing energy on the sun. It should be good for another 4 billion years or so. Dunno about us.

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I'm now thinking about our human ability to surprise ourselves.

We note tax funds being used to subsidize creationism instruction in classrooms -- then, Atheists turn the tables, and get permission to distribute *their* viewpoint to students, too. I'm thinking about drone victims in Yemen -- yes, another one of our endless, undeclared-war-zones -- and their notion of forming a *union* for those victimized and terrorized by U.S. drones.

Small signs of learning, here and there -- tiny oases of green among much hot sand. We can't stay at the oases forever, but it's a start, for the moment.

[long pause]

I'm also thinking about all the extreme new foods trotted out at ball park concession stands for this season, including a 4-pound burger and a pound of fries. If you think that's insane, you should see the size of the Big Gulp -- it doubles as the cylinder used in those Shooting-a-Human-out-of-a-Cannon tricks.

At least, I think it does. Not real sure. But, I am trying to not be as extreme as usual, and spend some time at the oasis, but it's damned difficult.

I only have a learner's permit.

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Baseball:

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/03/31/297324607/watch-for-the-first-time-an-umps-on-field-call-is-overturned>

Chile:

<http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/22780-chile-derails-monsanto-law-that-would-privatize-seeds>

Liberals:

<http://www.addictinginfo.org/2012/05/12/150-achievements-of-liberalism-that-conservatives-seek-to-destroy/>

Climate:

<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/mar/31/climate-change-report-ipcc-government-s-unprepared-live-coverage>

WHO:

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2014/03/25/294339956/pollution-from-home-stoves-kills-millions-of-people-worldwide>

and: http://www.upi.com/Health_News/2014/03/25/Air-pollution-kills-7-million-prematurely-worldwide-annually/3861395743820/?spt=htsv=6

Methane: http://www.upi.com/Science_News/2014/03/27/Methane-emissions-expected-to-soar-as-Earth-warms/9331395945475/?spt=htsv=4

Exxon Valdez:

<http://www.npr.org/2014/03/26/294709397/exxon-valdez-oil-spill-brings-bad-juju-and-pain-25-years-later>

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and: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/10717219/Exxon-Valdez-25-years-after-the-Alaska-oil-spill-the-court-battle-continues.html>

Oil's safer, and not safer: <http://www.npr.org/2014/03/25/293876738/why-oil-drilling-is-both-safer-and-riskier-since-exxon-valdez>

BP payments: <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-26429655>

BP contracts: <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-26571478>

BP spill: <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-26744117>

North Dakota: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/21/hiland-crude-pipeline-spill_n_5008405.html

Texas: <http://www.whig.com/story/25048438/crews-mopping-up-oil-spill-in-texas-galveston-bay>

Keystone and beyond:

<http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2014/03/20/3254081/pipelines-you-havent-heard-of/>

Dick: http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2014/03/28/Dick-Cheney-If-I-would-have-to-do-it-all-over-again-I-would/4001396021540/?spt=htsv=13

Torture:

<http://www.thewire.com/politics/2014/03/senate-report-torture-didnt-help-capture-osama-bin-laden/359895/>

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Sun power: <http://www.universetoday.com/18847/life-of-the-sun/>

and: http://imagine.gsfc.nasa.gov/docs/ask_astro/answers/961107a2.html

Tax-subsidy Creationism in the classroom:

<http://www.politico.com/story/2014/03/education-creationism-104934.html?hp=f2>

Atheism in the classroom: http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2014/03/29/after-christians-distribute-bibles-at-elementary-schools-atheists-ask-permission-to-do-the-same-and-get-it/?utm_medium=twitter&utm_source=twitterfeed

Drone victims' union: <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/3/31/families-of-dronevictimslaunchdroneunion.html>

Ball park foods:

<http://www.thewire.com/culture/2014/03/open-wide-ranking-the-most-extreme-foods-to-hit-base-ball-parks-this-season/359898/>

Today's Bonus:

Emergency Laughing Medicine with Eddie of Izzard in San Francisco:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8ltGMtTCuY>

Emergency Smooth Tunes Medicine with Mark of Knopfler in Switzerland:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cj1mo_j3Z5w