

Year-End Benders and Synapse Slips

Written by Alex Baer

Tuesday, 23 December 2014 19:21

So, here we are, just about to be slammed up alongside The Big Day, and I haven't a clue what to get you for the advertised Consumption Festival, for the co-opted Pagan Fest, for the sparkly Celebration of Lights, now that we've turned the corner on the darkest day of the year...

If only we could have already turned the corner on the darkest *year* in some years, too.

Of course, I suppose we should have all been braced for some fine holiday jeer, once Dick Cheney remorselessly rode back into town, sharing with us his trust-less leer and his lopsided sneer, riding in his throne of delusion, high atop a fetid holiday float constructed of bile and manure, throwing out razor-bladed candies for the kiddies, and certificates of replacement freedoms to be made good some day, drawn up on the backs of harrowing sets of torture photos and memos.

Yes, you had better watch out: □ Dickey Cheney's coming to town -- just to remind us all, apparently, that all our humanist, or even religious, objections of having bobsledded our way to fast-track international lawlessness are
crap

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You just can't get that kind of cheery, holiday eloquence anymore.

I still cannot believe that this man, and his hand puppet, were handed the top office by SCOTUS on an invisible, unknowable whim -- and that a good part of the nation signed up a second time, even after seeing what Part One of the Horror Show was all about.

I really wasn't going to revisit those endless horrors -- it's just a reflex to Cheney's sense of good will that prods me into this aghast holiday recoil, this sense of shock of American actions, this clear sense of squandered good will from the nations of the Earth after 9-11, and how we managed to convert it right away into terror and fear and destruction we visited on others, right away.

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So much of what we have done as a nation is a shame, given what we *could* have done for our own, and for the world; and so much of what we have *actually* done as a nation, for our own and the world, has visited on us yet more shame.

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Sorry about that. It's a *hap-hap-happy* time of year. I'm getting there, just as soon as I rinse that Cheney guy right out of my mouth and hair and memory. Here at year end, though, you'll be pleased to know that I am not again going to harp on the misery and pain created by The Mandatory Participation System, known as cutthroat capitalism, the sort we practice hereabouts.

And, no, I am still mostly all right with the notion of capitalism -- even if it is basically unsustainable, as currently practiced, unless we find a couple more planets a lot like our own, and pretty darned soon, and pretty darned close. Capitalism is the best of human jury-rigged systems to date -- which is a backhanded compliment to the howling imperfections of our species.

Social democracies, however, do laudable work for economic systems like capitalism, managing to handsomely meet the needs of their people without sacrificing business profits. No, it's just cutthroat capitalism I detest -- the mandatory importance of money over people -- which makes it so easy to become cynical about gift-giving this time of year, when intended kindnesses of a small gift are perverted for bottom line black ink improvement for the mass merchandise maw, and for the creation of reefs and shoals of showy consumption and one-upsmanship.

You know -- *Bragging Letters* stuff, but with money, instead of escalated and partially-fabricated year-long family accomplishments.

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No, if held in check, gift-giving is a beneficial side of capitalism, such as that practiced in Germany, for example; if allowed to run rampant, trampling people in the manic dash for mammon, cutthroat capitalism has a string of shames of its own on display.

Sorry -- it's the holiday season. I really hadn't meant to point out that *Santa* and *Satan* use the same letters.

Ooops.

So many good ideas, getting all twisted up over time -- it's a darned shame.

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I love how this season transform the most mundane consumer item into a one-of-a-kind, perfect gift-giving sentiment and statement. I lampoon this notion with friends. We check in with each other, and see what might work -- which is to say, what might be the most useless gift we can imagine, although there are points for humor. Needless to say, Archie McPhee gets a lot of business from our group this time of year, and at birthdays.

This year, for example, I am giving bunion cream to someone who has perfect foot health. (I had hoped to find Cream of Bunion Soup, to make a gift basket, but, alas, the good folks at Archie McPhee have lagged a bit on this one.)

I am also giving a package of dog travel diapers to a friend with a goldfish named Moose. There is also a book warming up in the wings, *Accordion for Dummies*, although I'm still probing to see which friend is most anti-accordion, anti-music, anti-polk, anti-French movie soundtrack cliché, or most anti-Welk.

Bigfoot and Cthulhu car refreshers round out the lot, along with a jellyfish ornament for the tree, and a tube of bacon toothpaste, and a twin-pack of both Shakespearean insult bandages, and bandages that look like strips of meat.

I have no idea what may be aimed my way this year, but they'll have to go some to beat the ornament of a unicorn in lederhosen, the grump notebooks, and the squirrel underpants.

However, we do have *some* taste: For example, we've all sworn to forego the zoo of candy *Poppers* available -- various animals and caricatures that emit small, round candies from their backside when operated.

Pass.

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Speaking of ideas getting all twisted up over time: Religion. Oh, I know, I shouldn't go down that path, especially at this time of year. You should know, though, that I'm all in favor of good works, and of hanging on tight to whatever beliefs get you through the night. Just not thrilled, you see, at yet another imperfect human system being used to lord power over people, and create classes of people within its system.

I mean, dying is a scary business, and religion provides some comfort for that final act. We need all the comfort we can get in this life. But I've never gotten over the feeling that we could get the same amount of fellowship, and good works, by having regular bowling nights, or movie nights, or book clubs, or poker nights, or what have you, with a charitable, do-for-others planning sense on the front end of the meeting, and some old-fashioned fun on the second half.

For me, the thing is, as soon as you set some human being loose who claims to know who and what God is, and what God thinks, or what God likes or hates, you've set yourself up for major-league tragedy, and needlessly so. Imperfect human beings are simply way out of their depth trying to limp around blindly in such terrain, trying to advise other humans -- just as confused and wrong and misdirected as anyone else -- about such things.

I mean, I don't want to ever be unkind to what anyone's beliefs about God are, or aren't, here in the land of freedom of religious beliefs. But surely you have noticed, as I have, that there's an awful lot of pain and suffering that comes from colliding beliefs about what God wants or doesn't want. Or what offends or delights God. And what things should be done, or not done, for God.

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And, of course, each member of each religion, believes himself and herself to be the only person with a 100% perfect, inside-track understanding of God's wants, thoughts, rules, and needs, and likes.

It's like a signal for a pile-on, loudly stating that only you, and your group, truly know what God wants and needs and likes, and wants humans to do.

In the end, we could manage our group and individual behaviors more easily, still enjoy fellowship with neighbors, still get good works accomplished, and have a little fun within small hobby groups -- all without having to square off in battle with our personal, fallible beliefs of what God really wants for Christmas, or any other time of the year.

Of course, we can keep screaming about what God wants, and keep lopping off heads, and keep blowing the smithereens out of one another in our self-righteousness -- or, we could simply try to contribute to human understanding -- including neighbors we'd rather see sent on a free, lifetime comet ride -- and try to address and meet our own human needs, right here on this planet.

Silly, right? Well, I defy you to go learn about someone else's religion, and see if you don't find that new religion pretty silly at first, when compared alongside the religious beliefs that you might personally consider *carved-in-stone normal*.

You ask me, I think God would rather we fight a whole lot less about what we think God is, and means, and wants -- and just get on with making our world a better place for everyone. You know: Feed the hungry, provide treatment for the sick, and so on.

Unless, of course, you are the type of human who never experiences need, never gets hungry, never gets sick, and has no use for helping others now, and has no use for needing any possible help in the future when you yourself get into a tough spot.

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Of course, you're probably right: God wants us to hate each other and blow the bejesus out of each other, and be as sick, hungry, and as ill-clothed and unsheltered, as possible.

(This is about an 8-point-5 on the Sarcasm-o-meter. Please do not try this at home. Performed by a professional on a closed track -- but not in closed mind. Your (s)mileage may vary.)

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Life, I find, has a nasty habit of periodically taking everything we believe and running it through the blender -- usually at top speed, and with the cover off -- just to see how it all looks on the wall of our minds. Well-honed facts, favorite photos, hard-won recipes, tricky directions across town, precious memories, and deeply cherished beliefs, all mushed around, all sent sailing around in our heads, splattering and splashing everywhere, like a spin-art painting from the carnival.

It's the life I find / have, anyway. And, I can't imagine only word-jugglers and other thought-ticklers in the campy circus called Mind are affected this way at year end. Heck, from what I see, even the most practical, prodigious, puritanical, non-introspective types get swept up in the seasonal swirl, hammering out those Bragging Letters that fall out of greeting cards that slip through the mails like sugared-and-spiced stilettos where envy and chest-beating rights seem to be the goal.

(I no longer attempt those letters. I am really poor at it, and get swept up in event recitation like anyone else, as time-managed shorthand attempts for substitute life-sharing, in place of actual life sharing, when I'd meant to stroll among the year's notions and thoughts and feelings -- and share something personal, right out of my reportorial sensory equipment.)

Most people try to recapture important relationships of the past, and try to convey the artful wire-whisk moments of life they've entertained, along with the brute force of cement mixer realities dumped on them.

I figure it this way: If that relationship was, and is, important enough, those little hills and dales

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of life moments, and the mountainous ones, will have been shared throughout the year, and not just saved up for the annual dumping in the landfill of memory.

Sure, I get it -- people are busy, things happen, various paths are taken, and so on. People grow in different directions. The end-of-year Bragging Letter is just an imperfect attempt to recapture a past in which those people once played a part on the stage of life.

That these distant people have now slipped to getting a yearly round-up of high points, on a laser-printed or photocopied page, for mass distribution, should be telling us something about our attempts to remain close with those with whom we feel are most important.

They say we make time for those things, and those people, we truly love. (There are times I detest logic, and in the same way in which one has to remind oneself from time to time, that no matter how much I would like it to be otherwise, one can only go from where one currently, actually *IS*.)

But, I get it: We're trying to have it all. And, being human, this is our imperfect solution for doing so. But it reminds me of people who call themselves multi-taskers, believing they are doing a wonderful job, and are keeping up on many fronts simultaneously, when endless studies have shown that multi-taskers are in fact far less efficient, and less accurate, in their taskings -- all while maintaining a very high, stellar, and congratulatory degree of self-belief about their performance.

We can rationalize anything, given half a minute at full idle -- even rationalization. This must be why people who text, phone, chat, tend to personal grooming activities, and who chow down on a variety of food and drink, while supposedly maintaining alert piloting of a hurtling, high-speed, multi-ton chunk of modern transportation, are so darned surprised when things go Ka-Pow: Their self-belief in their abilities to multi-task were never higher, *for heaven's sakes... and, all of a sudden, this big truck came out of nowhere -- nowhere, I'm telling you -- and...*

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So, yeah: I get distracted, thoughts come and go, and I drift along, especially when I stumped what to get people for the holiday season. But, I think I've finally figured out what I can get you for a present. Sorry it's taken so long to figure this out, so thanks for hanging in there and waiting so nicely.

- **Here it is: ☐ I wish you an absence of fear, and I wish you the presence of life.**

I know, there's been no advertising for this gift, and it hasn't come out of a box or a blister-pack, and it wasn't obtained by *worshipping at the cash register of my choice*, but...

It seems to me that an awful lot of things go badly wrong when people operate out of fear -- the concept works for individuals as it does for groups and nations.

The fear of want. The fear of bad treatment. The fear of need. Lots of fears, perpetuated by people playing the same social, religious, political, economic games that get us into such terrible trouble in the first place.

So, my gift is the observation that fear brings no good into being, and my wish is that you are able to live without inviting fear to always tag along with you, automatically, without asking. (And, no, I am not advising that you simply ignore actual threats and terrible troubles -- just that you can find the strength to live as strongly as you can, and not let fear do your talking and acting - to not let it be driving you, on auto-pilot.)

I also wish you Life -- a focus on life, living, and being purposefully alive, versus accidentally alive.

Here is what I mean: We all go through life hearing what a rare thing, and a what a rare blessing life is -- yet we hardly acknowledge it or live it at that level.

We get used to it. We wake up every day. We have things to do. Life goes on.

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Few of us ever confront our own mortality unbidden. I can tell you that I have thought about such things a long time, from being a child with rheumatic fever in a hospital, to being an adult after a heart attack from months of overwork, to an even older adult, fighting off cancer by taking a little bit of death -- in radiation and chemotherapy -- in order to sneak a little more life.

We say this life is a rare and precious thing, and yet we treat it like dirty hand-me-down clothing from a questionable yard or rummage sale. True: We know no better. Each of knows life. We have gotten used to it. None of our days are filled with samples of Non-Life to test drive and get used to, before we each must inevitably end.

I hope you will not wait until your mortality confronts you and forces you to examine how you're using this gift, this precious thing we call life.

I also hope you will find a way to live without fear. I hope you will live intentionally, on purpose, and not by unthinking default, as if you have all the time in the world. Because, frankly, not to be a downer about it during a festive time of year -- you don't.

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I just flashed on Scrooge here, after his travail, after his night of Ghosts, as he greets the new day, realizing he still has time to make things right.

Perhaps that is the power of forced Zen, maybe, when driven by white-knuckled experiences with Ghosts, but I sure wish I could master that skill of intense focus to make every morning like that, where I figuratively fling open the shutters and greet the world joyously and laughing, immersed in the joy of the gift of a brand new day.

And then, sharing that feeling all day long.

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I can both imagine, and not *really* imagine, a world where *everyone* lives that way, if you know what I mean. What changes would come!

Why, I'd be willing to speculate that we'd even have the wherewithal to laugh away foul and evil Specters of American Actions Past like Dick Cheney, and not allow him to yank our fears around, and not allow him to steal all our days ahead of American Actions Present.

That's the peculiar thing about change. It's absolutely, completely, *totally* impossible -- until suddenly, it isn't, and change happens.

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Someday, we will all get up in the morning, each of us, and come to realize we are living our very last day, that there will be no more automatically-issued days, and our run of time is really done. Seems to me this is a most unfortunate moment to want to start living on purpose, not on auto-pilot -- living as if you really meant it.

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If I'm lobbying for anything here, it's just for wishing you and yours well, and all the best. Wherever you hang your hat, I wish you a warm and happy holiday, and a long life, free of fear, and rich with on-purpose living.

Look at it this way: At least you don't have to ask me to swap your gift for a bigger size or a different color. It doesn't even need to be chucked into the hamper or dry-cleaned -- just kept somewhere safe, inside you.

Welcome to a new day, the gift that keeps on giving.

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Pass it on.

Today's Bonus: The perils and particulars of modern-day Elfdom:

<http://apps.npr.org/naughty-or-nice/>