

Meditations on Our Daily Horror

Written by Alex Baer

Monday, 07 October 2013 14:54 - Last Updated Monday, 07 October 2013 18:42

October: This is the traditional month for frost on the pumpkin, a jump-started sweet tooth, and a handful of artificial horrors.

Except every day is a day of all-too-real horror with Republicans. Forget Elm Street -- every day is Nightmare on Capitol Hill these days, and each day comes with at least one twisted plot twist and adrenalin rush. It's not unlike the ultimately depressing, empty-calorie gore-banquet of a slasher flick.

You know the feeling: The highly-charged, hyper-energized sensation stemming from emptying half of your Trick-or-Treat stash in one sitting. As usual, that sugar-rushing rocket ride can be exhilarating, but the plummet back to Earth is always queasy and dizzy-making.

Thing is, for adults, there is no staying home from school, no matter how much of a bellyful you've had of it all, and no matter how much it hurts.

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I know a little something about horror. For the last 263 days, I've been playing host to my own Mortality, night and day, with no breaks and no time off for good behavior. I've been fighting cancer.

You remember the strangest things during Important Life Pronouncements like that. For me, (showing my age now, I know) I remembered -- right there in the doctor's office, while he was breaking this news across my head -- a line from an Al Stewart song: *It sharpens your perception when your back's against the wall.*

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When Life insists on a course of action, there's only a shrugging acceptance, or else total silence, available as reasonable choices. This is unlike the well-rehearsed shrieks, moans, and chain-rattling emanating from Republicans currently haunting the hallways of Congress.

My national horror is on display for all to see. It's a spectacle of brain-free, daredevil brinkmanship, rivalling the nuclear game of Cold War Chicken played for some decades between superpowers.

In this national horror show, Republicans wield the glazed-over, glaring stare along with the stained chain saw, the stone-sharpened scalpel, the switchblade stiletto. The ones made to suffer are everyday Americans suddenly finding their lives being lived inside in a horror film.

Others threatened? Only the rest of the world -- the poor dopes who have leaned and built their country's financial futures on America's house-of-cards numbers operations. Right about now, a global breath is being held, with every non-American hoping their countries have picked well in what has unexpectedly turned out to be more like a hasty hand of three-card Monte than a rational investment structure.

Opposing this singular, persistent, irrefutable horror?

Well, for starters, my own personal horror has been much more private. On the cellular level, it's probably been quite a show, no doubt, offering all the chills, thrills, and spills of a personal meltdown rivalling the sort of "Gone Fission" sign spray-painted on the sides of a larger, missile-based Armageddon.

In this private show, Fate is one of the players at my table. Doctors are some others. They join in, at Life's insistence, with Insurance Companies, Big Pharma, Current Science, and some others. Mortality, for example, is quite a space hog, taking up two or three chairs. The only people affected are me, family, friends.

The other people threatened? Everyone. Absolutely *everyone*. There is no "Get Out of Cancer Free" card. I know. I've really,

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looked.

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You could make a case that cancer has got us both in its grips, both me and the political process of my country. For my part, I am my own hostage to cancer; however, every American is a hostage to the cancer in our political process.

Despite constitutional guarantees to the contrary, as an American, I am in double jeopardy -- held twice as cancer's hostage. Once by my illness, and once by the dysfunctional, obstructionist, supremely selfish Republican party.

Both situations, as we used to say in the military, really flame my ass. It's a real push which situation is pouring the most avgas on that flame at any one time.

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I keep toying with names for the Republican party. It's childish, but it also conceals an attempt to much more honestly name the evil under which normal-appearing people operate. *Grand Obstructionist Party* was in the lead for a while.

The longer the shutdown goes on, and the more that innocent people are so tremendously, deeply, and so negatively affected, a new name has now emerged: *Gigantic Orifice Party*.

There's a couple different ways you can take that, I know. They're *both* correct. (What else would you expect from incredibly huge jerks that constantly talk and say nothing?)

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I blame factual ignorance, voter apathy, and uber-creative gerrymandering for allowing Republicans into office, and in maintaining office once there.

I blame greed, self-aggrandizement, and petty power games for the Republican shutdown. You can add in fear of special interests losing their death-grip on the country, too. Then, toss in some racism, too.

(Don't buy the racism charge? Then, tell me you think Republicans would have done half the things they've tried with a *white* President. Still not convinced? Then, flip it around: What would Republicans have done if *Democrats* had tried even a quarter of the things Republicans have wrought against this President? (You *do*

remember the torrents of rage and outrage poured forth by Republicans regarding any pushback whatsoever on Dubya's policies and pronouncements? The charges of anyone in disagreement being traitorous, and so on, right?)

I do not know which Universal entity, if any, to blame for cancer. It just is. So far science is mostly stumped about cancer, and about Republicans.

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People have asked me what cancer feels like. When that first came up, I had a knot of thoughts tangled up in my forehead, all competing for tongue-space.

There's the initial sharp, searing sensation of being eaten alive from inside, as if by a piranha bigger than your fist. Then, there's the terror of confronting monthly and weekly chemotherapy, the need for 35 daily radiation treatments, gradually losing hair from all parts of your body...

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There's the oppressive exhaustion -- a simple lack of energy to even cross a small room without collapsing -- and from bearing up under the disease, and, even worse, exhaustion from bearing up under the treatments.

There's the five-thousand-dollar shot of Neulasta to help your bone marrow stimulate the production of helpful cells to join the battle. The Neulasta shot is not covered by insurance. The Neulasta shot makes your larger bones, like your hips and legs, feel like they are being napalmed, day and night, for 3 or 4 days.

There's the need to suddenly and very deeply understand a lot of moving parts: medical information, jargon, terminologies, processes, treatments, and then, all the financial ramifications -- insurance coverage, private funding and savings, any financial assistance or grants, estimated costs of fighting the disease, broken out by medical specialty and/or facility...

There's the slow realization that medicine has been endlessly fractured into many specialties, with each segment playing one portion of the overall care role -- and then, realizing that no medical person is assigned to coordinate the total care picture among specialists. Not unless you do it yourself -- so, you take that DIY role on, too.

There's more that could be said. But, after thinking about this a little, I'm now prone to saying something short, like, *My heart attack was a piece of cake. □ Out of the hospital in a couple days. □ Just a couple of quick, pretty easy procedures, and all finished. □ My heart attack was like a wind sprint, but cancer? □ Cancer is like a marathon.*

I try to be polite. I *don't* say that cancer is like a marathon, all right -- through steeplechase grounds, through an obstacle course, through a minefield, and with nobody bothering to set out a Finish Line anywhere, or tell you where one might be.

I *don't* say that Death is the Finish Line. In this country, it's not polite to talk about Death, not even when you have the heavy weight of your mandated guest, Mortality, draped on your arm, light as a battleship.

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It will help you prepare for your own possible, personal, future health care crises to understand a couple things. First is that we have an OK health care system in this country. It's headed in the direction, simultaneously, of being both a Third World system as well as being an exclusive system for the wealthy, Elysium style.

The other thing to keep in mind is that we don't really have a *health care* system in this country -- we have a *profit care* system in this country.

[Remember: The medical system earns its money not from patient wellness, but from patient sickness and illness. No money changes hands when the patient is well.]

The symptoms of *profit care* are easy to spot: Doctors are chased from room to room in 10-minute office visit segments. Doctors' offices must hire not more medical support staff, but more insurance navigators and "payment enforcers" as insurance companies each have over their own separate and peculiar systems to navigate. And, as each insurance company prefers to leave claims unpaid to improve their margins, doctors' staff must pry payments out of the insurance companies.

Getting ill in America is a huge DIY proposition: Do your own homework, as doctors can't keep up. Do your own case management, as there is no health care professional assigned to track and manage your care among the large number of specialists. Do your own medical training and financial legwork, too, while you're at it. And figure out your own support system while you receive treatment, and...

This is the way corporations and Republicans like it -- lots of profit in a system like ours, even if it is a system sinking in quality while per-person costs rise in relation to what the rest of the world pays for its health care.

This is why Republicans have been bashing and blasting their bartering about in Congress, and

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why there is a shutdown: Republicans must maintain the status quo, for industry and investor *profit care*, and not allow improvements in actual health care.

This is also why Republicans have voted -- what? 41? 42? -- separate times to kill the Affordable Care Act, as it represents the beginning of actual change in the *profit care* system. It represents a crack of daylight, a small opening of change in how things are done -- which, to the Republican mind, and to their masters, means that single-payer health care is imminent...

... and why would anyone want to run health care at only 3 percent above cost, when there's sooooo much more profit to be made instead?

(My answer is, as I believe yours should be: Profit is simply not appropriate intruding in every single facet of human life -- such as maintaining human life itself.)

Meanwhile: Back when the count was at "only" 33 separate votes to kill "Obamacare," as Republicans love to call it in their demeaning, fun-poking way, the amount of money wasted by House Republicans on those votes was "only" 48 million dollars. That was more than a half-dozen, money-wasting, grand-standing votes ago.

This is why it is so incredibly ludicrous that these are the same Republicans threatening to force the United States into a first-ever default situation on its financial obligations, and to shut down the country, and in turn, shut down the world.

(Maybe the GOP thinking here is that this should teach the world to get caught up in our financial machinations, since the sub-prime mortgage, credit default swap madness didn't seem to scare them away for too long.)

If you're confused, you have every right to be. Yes, these are the same Republicans who have been stacking up brand-new bricks of hundred-dollar bills and igniting them on the steps of Capitol Hill, taking endless vote after worthless vote to kill something they fear: The beginning of change to corporate and investor profit, to the end of *profit care* and to the first tiny,

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microscopic, baby-step establishment of
health care
instead.

Yes, these are the same Republicans that demanded taxes be slashed for corporations and the rich while, at the same time, two major wars and a handful of skirmishes be jammed onto the nation's credit card.

That's how worried about spending Republicans are.

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It's hilariously sad, humbling, and horrifying that most people do not know a few, very basic facts from the world around them and seem incapable of putting those facts together and making a new thought. It's sad and terrifying that the very people that Republicans pole-ax on a regular basis are blissfully unaware of those unwanted *body piercings* and continue to support *The Piercers*

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There is an unnerving horror in the blank expressions returned as answer to the question, *Can you name one thing any Republican politician has done for regular Americans in the last five years? □ Ten years? □ The last twenty? □ Fifty years?*

Then again, I'm seeing President Nixon was really a footloose and fancy-free liberal, when compared to the current pack of hyper-conservative charlatans currently on tap in Congress.

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You could say we both have cancer, me and Congress. I'm treating my cancer with all the resources, knowledge, support, and energy I can scrape together. I'm dismayed at seeing no

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one urgently treating Congress's cancer. No activity. Nothing. *Crickets.*

In fact, Americans seem to think it's still the 1950s, back when politics was discussed with a good-natured wink, a chuckling back-slap, and a friendly agreement to disagree. Politics is now a street mugging and a knife fight -- on an easy, low-key, kicked-back sort of day, that is.

No, this is not your father's political system.

In a triumph of propaganda and misinformation over facts, and in a demonstration of a lack of critical thinking and in the power of hate radio and fantasy newscasts, most people believe *both* political parties are to blame. False equivalencies abound, reproducing like rabbits, in an atmosphere where there is no legal obligation to tell the truth in newscasts.

But, then again, as you know, real news is only covered on comedy shows. News programs now focus on the comedy of our culture and its players -- who and what is hot, the latest celebrity scandal, the latest Auto-Tuned, *non-singing* singer...

And, newspapers won't bother you anymore with exposure to all manners of news, be it topical or in-depth. No, no -- newspapers are almost all history, so, the news that you'll personally encounter will only be the news that you already know about, in order to be able to type that into your search box... or it'll just be the blather beamed at you from Fox, the original fixer and foxer of facts.

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There is so much to object to -- so much that is worthy of legitimate outrage, and yet, those energies are no longer used here. Where is the objection, even in principle? Where's the outrage here? Is it out getting pepper-sprayed -- gassed by chemical weapons, here in America, home for the outrage of chemical weapons -- for daring to speak its mind?

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Where is the objection to the wholesale co-opting of the language, and the attempted hijacking of all conversations by the GOP, by using super-spun, overly focus-grouped, think-tanked language? You know -- like using "entitlements" in referring to Social Security, instead of accurately saying, "insurance program"?

The only "entitlement" is the yawning expectation that we have allowed corporations and the wealthy to develop in which they routinely receive special treatment and are continuously absolved from a sensible share of financial responsibility in the costs of running the country.

My own guess is that *We the People* haven't had a victory for so long that we no longer believe it possible to win. We no longer believe in the power of banding together and insisting the People's business be done by our representatives.

There are plenty of easier, more pleasant things to do. There will be no revolution, it appears, until Big Brother, wearing its GOP armband on its starched brown shirt, comes for our beer, our booze, and our wall-screen television. That might prod us into action, finally. Maybe.

Meanwhile, it looks like we're gonna need plenty of one or the other while we all watch Congressional and shutdown events unfold on the wall -- and in the world -- nearest us.

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You want to know what cancer looks and feels like? Take a good look at Republicans and their role in the political process since 2008. Take a look at the extraordinary, super-extremist, right-wing terrain that has been the so-called level playing field of the political structure for the last 30 years, and tilted even more wildly for the last five years.

Take a good look, too, at our own desires to not get involved, because, *after all, it's just politics as usual...*

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Except that it's not. It's cancer. Which means it's now to the Death.

Trick or Treat.