

Faith, Hope, and That Itchy Sensation

Written by Alex Baer

Tuesday, 04 February 2014 14:01 - Last Updated Tuesday, 04 February 2014 17:38

It's been a restless winter. Our dogs move around from one of their beds to another, and rotate spots on the floor in an ambling, nomadic waltz. The ants have been especially antsy here this year, leaking out of the ancient, pseudo-farmhouse woodwork in streams, eddies, vortices, miniature maelstroms -- a bumper crop of biblical proportions.

The two humans residing here travel back and forth unpredictably, errant with errands, steeped in to-do lists, turned to and fro by daily tidal forces, triggered by a general twitchiness, tuned to some facial-tic-producing frequency just outside the range of hearing.

When not under the spell of whatever it is that might be working on us, we sometimes ask ourselves about the nature of the possible and probable propellants involved in our fidgeting. No answers so far.

We keep coming up with a general "hookanno" -- our shorthand for "who can know?" We say it like "Winnebago," which is HOO-kan-no. We sound like hoot owls, muttering in the loose, eternal wake of our room-to-room search, hunting for reasons why we might be here, on this planet, just as much as why we might be here, in this particular room. Both are tricks of memory, I am convinced, one easier to resolve than the other. I forget which is which.

Our house is old. It has sections tacked on here and there. It is growth by afterthought rather than by planning and forethought. It was built a little at a time, by a hobbyist with more good intentions than good skills. If Euclid lived here, he would have flat gone insane before his furniture was moved in and arranged.

For amusement, and if money were no object, I'd be happy to pay anyone a hundred dollars if they could find a right angle in the place. I'd even supply the T-squares and protractors and miter box templates and what-not, then watch the squirming, reluctant appreciation of applicants who reach the same conclusion we have: This patchwork of add-ons is, accidentally, part fun house and part House-of-Mystery gravity vortex.

In the cold-chill, goose-bumped, spine-tingler moments, we suspect some sort of seepage from the spirit side of the mirror, from the flip side of this dimension and reality, from this version of

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the multiverse. We chalk up it all up to a general *hinky-skinky, hoodoo-vooodoo, deja vu hookanno*.

Like as not, our restiveness is from funky weather, unfathomable headlines, the holiday season letdown, Punxsutawney Phil's pronouncement of more winter, aging joints, and the twin disappointments of tax season and income evaporation and/or nongeneration. Things like that.

I really don't think that any of this is inexplicable or otherworldly. And it's not us being especially apoplectic or apocalyptic. We are no Harold Campings. Our clearest understanding of Faith is that it is Hope, mixed with Wishful Thinking, but minus the Certainty of in-hand, eyes-on, in-person experience. We try to remain logical, sensible, down-to-earth through it all.

It's more like cabin fever, maybe, than anything -- an itchy-all-over sensation, like having spent far too much time in long underwear and sweatpants. Could be just an ache to turn the corner on the weather and get back into cut-offs and tee shirts as indoor/outdoor wear.

We have only two times of year here: Yard Work Season and Pellet Stove Season. We have had enough of the latter and are nowadays meditating on the former. The pellet stove, which we call Baby, may require overmuch fussing, fine-tuning, and general diaper-cleaning -- hence, its name -- for its heat dividend, but at least it shreds your time without the necessity for landscaping calisthenics.

No matter *how* helpful that may be in love-handle reduction.

Not complaining, mind you. I originate from snow country, where two feet overnight is a kind of a yawner. This is why I am slack-jawed when cars are in ditches around the country, in the southern half, after a light dusting of snow on the roads. One gets used to some things being normal and forgets when others don't have the same opportunity for constant, industrial-strength practice in the same areas and arenas.

For example, we here have a low bug tolerance, and would have no real use, or comfort around, cockroaches and palmetto bugs the size of ottomans and coffee tables. So, like I say, I

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don't complain about the weather, not much. Even snow -- not that we get hardly much, not by any measure. If anything, we get ice fog or rain. This is OK with me. You don't shovel fog or rain.

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Still, the news remains serious. *Real* news is almost always serious. Real news used to be delivered in newspapers and on televisions and radios, with editorial comments clearly denoted. Today, we have almost no newspapers left, and *fake* news is what we get -- fluff pieces, pop culture breaking news, personal beliefs and axe-grinding bannered as news.

Among the real news I have stumbled upon, and fallen over, like a black dog in a dark room, sleeping on a midnight-blue carpet, is a lot that is unpleasant, worrisome, demoralizing, and brain-breaking.

Like the death of Philip Seymour Hoffman via the sadly popular plunge of drugs. I should think he had the world on a string, that the world was his oyster. Perhaps he had a life-threatening allergy to shellfish. It appeared to be so at the end.

No matter how fine his life may have been, he appears to have been helpless to his meat-based desires. In this, we can experience shock anew by relating to him. We are all often helpless to our own meat-based desires. One would think that would tell you something right there about the viability of our species.

It's all part of a very old joke, one I have been half-muttering, with varying degrees of muted, miasmatic misinterpretations, for some decades now: *There has been an alarming increase in the things I know absolutely nothing about.*

I am at a loss to explain many things. Modern-day Republicanism, for example. Worse still, the rise of science denial, the decline of critical thinking, the swelling tide of ignorance and apathy. Another old joke: What's the difference between those two? *Answer: □ I don't know,*

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and I don't care.

Things tiny and oversized, and in between, arrive in my field of view and then depart, still unknown, a sticky residue of bewilderment and anxiety my reward for paying attention to planetary life as it's currently lived.

In an age of information explosion, the number of voices delivering our news is at an all-time low. Thanks to media concentration and consolidation, there are fewer opinions and notions jostling for attention in the marketplace of ideas. Thanks to misguided FCC rulings, there is no equation or clause demanding equal time: Voices go unheard, ideas go dormant and die premature deaths.

Thanks to lazy thinking, we are awash in false equivalencies -- the seeming fairness of the presentation of multiple points of view. Only thing is, all points of view are not equal. For example, there really aren't a lot of contrary viewpoints one would call valid or sane, when it comes to the general notion that not killing people is a good thing. Or, that helping people in emergencies, and in crisis, is a good thing.

Well, some say, why shouldn't creationism be taught in public schools? Well, how about for the same reason that there is no requirement for evolutionary theory, or calculus, to be part of worship services at any of the world's houses of religion.

Life is far from logical or perfect. One look at the number of GOP science deniers on the U.S. House of Representatives science committees -- which is virtually all of them -- easily demonstrates that point.

I sometimes simply have no idea how to proceed. There are serious, perpetual problems that can be faced and solved only by everyday people banding together and acting in unison -- yet their one strength, strength in numbers, is pissed away by cliques and groups and subgroups, and so on, who insist on remaining at one another's throats.

This is no doubt by design, by those who have the most to lose when the status quo slips and

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slides, when it skids and slithers sideways, when it all goes south.

Take income equality: One subject bearing endless facets and effects, and for all strata of society. Here are some notions to consider:

- The minimum wage would have to be from \$21.16 to \$25.05 today to represent similar buying power in 1968 dollars.
- Private sector Walmarts of the world push off legitimate, minimum human needs onto the public sector by supplying its minimum-wage workers with food stamp paperwork and advising employees to seek out public assistance to help make ends meet -- no matter how apart those ends may be.
- On any given night, there are 300,000 American veterans who are homeless, either sleeping in the streets or in shelters. Some time during the year, anywhere from 529,000 and 840,000 veterans are homeless. That's *not* counting families who are homeless, too.
- The richest 1% own 46% of the planet's wealth. The "bottom half" of the world's population now own almost as much as the richest 85 people on this globe. The 30 richest Americans now own as much as half of the U.S. population.
- There is less chance for the bottom half of Americans to move up than anywhere else in the world. America's middle class is further from the top than in all other developed countries.

And so on. I don't want to get into what our nation's student's grades are like when measured against the world. Or how far behind in math, engineering, and foreign language use we are when compared to the rest of the field. I'm not sure I can think straight any longer about the Pentagon budget, the stains to the Constitution by the NSA and by the Supreme Court, by the horror and waste of two wars of recent convenience, by the hypocrisy of Teabaggers and...

And so on.

I have often had ants crawling all over me, figuratively. Now, it is literally, too. They are everywhere, little black sugar ants. The pellet stove, unlike a wood stove, does not work when the electricity goes out. Funny, how you don't think things through all the time, and have expectations about things working out.

The only thing I keep discovering, and then forgetting for a while, and then rediscovering again,

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after considerable brain cramps and bursts of depression, is this: To increase your happiness and contentment, decrease your expectations. It is one of my survival-based, souvenir chants from the Bush years, when planes flew into the sides of towers, while the economy was flying into the sides of mountains.

The house is a wispy, asthmatic pipe organ when the wind stirs. Breezes out there signal their gleeful intent and sniggering desire to slip inside, past window panes, seemingly right through the glass itself, whistling almost as much as the teapot on the stove.

Just announcing the numbing cold in its teapot shriek, and not the warming steam. It's that time of year. It's started to snow. It is supposed to be nearing zero for the next 4 or 5 nights. For the next 4 or 5 days, it is not supposed to be sultry enough to even coax the thermometer up to freezing.

Maybe the antarctic front, the swirls of snow and icy bite, will chomp down on, and thin out, this swarm of ants -- talk about scratching an itch.

Faith aside, hope abides.

The Oregon Vortex and House of Mystery: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KdxYT0Ngnc>

and: <http://www.oregonvortex.com/>

Phil's Phorecast: <http://www.cnn.com/2014/02/02/us/punxsutawney-phil-winter/>

Phil and the Farmers: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/02/01/269999572/punxsutawney-phil-vs-the-farmers-almanac-who-do-you-trust>

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Rapture pet care: <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/story/2012-03-21/rapture-pet-rescue-business-hoax/53691320/1>

Harold Camping:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/18/us/harold-camping-radio-entrepreneur-who-predicted-worlds-end-dies-at-92.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

Hoffman:

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/03/movies/philip-seymour-hoffman-actor-dies-at-46.html?src=ISMR_AP_LO_MST_FB

Minimum wage: <http://www.raisetheminimumwage.com/facts/entry/amount-with-inflation/>

and:

<http://truth-out.org/op-ed/item/10489-the-725-minimum-wage-is-too-low-for-21st-century-america>

Homeless veterans: <http://www.veteransinc.org/about-us/statistics/#homelessness>

Wealth: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/01/20/davos-2014-oxfam-85-richest-people-half-world/4655337/>

More wealth myth-busting: <http://www.nationofchange.org/more-inequality-shock-1391440735>

Today's bonuses -- some fun from the National Film Board of Canada:

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upsZZ2s3xv8>

and: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJHyb7sXikI>

plus: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgydkfnUEi8>

and: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ht6lRb8y_AQ

(And, you know, almost any Jon Stewart or Bill Maher program will get you through a snowstorm, I find. They're my early favorite for 2016.)