

Dancing on the Edge

by Bill Herbst

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A simple definition of sanity (according to Google) is: *Reasonable and rational behavior*. The opposite — insane or crazy — is defined as *mentally deranged or demented*. For my purposes here, mental derangement includes ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that are strange, bizarre, outrageous, or otherwise not part of reality. Merely considering an idea isn't insane, but believing it might be crazy, depending on the idea.

Among the many vexing questions that I grapple with, perhaps not every single day, but very frequently, are these two: First, *Are human beings — meaning humanity in the collective sense — crazier now than we were in the past?* And second, *Is our collective insanity actually increasing in the 21st century?* I don't know the answer to either question, at least not definitively. The jury is still out, and the verdict could go either way. I am certain, however, of the wisdom of cartoonist Walt Kelly's well-known phrase from his comic strip Pogo: "*We have met the enemy, and he is us.*"

I was born as a second-wave Baby Boomer in 1949, in the early years of the Atomic Age, following the end of World War II via the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan. In fact, I was born less than three months after the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic bomb, called *RDS-1* or, in U.S. security code, *Joe-1* (for Joseph Stalin), which ushered in the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union that set the tone for the Cold War 1950s.

The apparent safety of my middle-class suburban childhood was juxtaposed against an ever-present shadow background — the horror and madness of potential nuclear war. I remember the absurd "duck and cover" drills in elementary school where we hunkered underneath our desks, as if that would protect us from a nuclear blast.

The history of humanity, civilization, and particularly America that was presented to me in my youth — both formally, through primary and secondary education and even through my undergraduate college years, and informally, through immersion in and what I now regard as indoctrination into American Dream mythology — uniformly extolled the virtues of modern civilization, particularly in this country, and praised progress and the improvement of the human condition.

And boy, did we make progress! Among my personal memories are the building of the interstate highway system, erection of the first wave of shopping centers, and the appearance of fast food chains. I can recall the first MacDonald's in St. Louis opening in 1958 on Route 66 only a short bicycle ride from my parents' home, with its Golden Arches pop-culture architecture and sign in front proclaiming "Over 3 million hamburgers sold" (60 years later, that number is now 300 billion). If my recollection is correct (and Google supports this), a regular hamburger at MacDonald's in those pre-Big-Mac days cost 15¢. A cheeseburger was 19¢, malt shakes were 20¢, and a serving of French Fries would set you back one thin dime. Cheap food in every way possible.

Back then, in my childhood, the only person whose sanity (or lack of it) concerned me was myself. I knew what appropriate behavior was and strove to maintain it, but I worried that I might be crazy, since my inner life was under extreme duress. I had very dark dreams, to use a metaphor. Most everyone else seemed normal to me. At least they acted as if they were normal and gave no indication of struggling with inner demons. Of course, that was white, middle-class America in the 1950s, where social conformity was at a premium. While I knew people — mostly kids, but also some adults — who seemed out of control to me and who were cruel or hurtful toward animals or other people, they tended to be rejected by society and labeled as bad rather than crazy.

At that point, in mid-childhood, I didn't realize that my inward and secret psychopathology was neither unique nor personal, but was, in fact, quite ordinary — if not technically universal among humans, at least commonplace. I knew little about the psyche and nothing about the metaphysics of the collective unconscious or the realm of archetypes. All that came later.

Over time, I realized that being crazy, at least partially, was the rule rather than the exception for people. I've come to regard everyone I know or have ever known as suffering from insanity, which I prefer to think of as damage. Apparently, to be human is to be damaged to one extent or another. We are all crazy. It's just more obvious in some people than in others. As I understand it now, the challenge is to heal the damage as much as possible. We can't eradicate our insanity, but we may be able to minimize its power over us and our behavior. Understanding our own damage can be invaluable in expanding and deepening our compassion for others.

The particular brand of insanity that most interests me here in this commentary is not that of the raving lunatic, nor of seemingly functional or even highly successful human beings who are clinically deranged (including the current occupant of the White House). Millions exist who are potentially violent psychopaths or seriously disturbed sociopaths, and they are dangerous to themselves and others, but they're not the subject of this commentary. Instead, I'm concerned with the craziness of ordinary people through culturally supported

but false beliefs. Such people have been assimilated into the Hive Mind. They believe what they're told and do whatever they've been trained to do. They're considered normal and healthy, but they're not. They're crazy. For me, examples of this kind of insanity include denial of anthropogenic climate change, or faith in "the wisdom of the market" to justify selfish behavior.

Thousands of books have been written and documentaries made about what happened in Germany over the first half of the 20th century. Longstanding racial hatreds combined with effective propaganda to produce a kind of mass hypnosis. For a long time afterwards, that collective madness was considered aberrant, especially by Americans, who were certain that such insanity could never happen here and wondered if there were some unique vulnerability in the German character. There was not, and it could happen here. It's been happening in America throughout our history. We just didn't realize it.

In my view, the reason this is important is that humanity has reached a critical juncture in our evolution. If we are to have a future as a species, our collective sanity will be a telling factor, but civilization lobbies against it.

While not the only factor in our collective arrival at this crossroads, agriculture is a prime culprit. As hunter-gatherer tribes — which were the social condition of our species through 95% of our brief 200,000-year existence — we congregated in small kinship bands, living off the land. Horticulture (gardening) may have existed, but primarily we fed ourselves from nature's bounty. When agriculture started roughly 11-12,000 years ago, with domestication of animals, ownership of land and resources, and planting of crops (especially grains, which could be stored for long periods after harvest), humanity began its first experience of *surplus*. The extra food from agricultural harvests led to civilization, which in turn led to money and inequality, to masters and slaves, rich and poor, haves and have-nots, war and empire.

The entire history of civilization is crazy as hell. For all its vaunted achievements and "benefits" — art, music, literature, architecture, science, technology, etc. — the underlying reality of civilization has always been organized, systematic madness, despite the seeming appearance of normalcy. In the past, however, humanity's numbers were small and our powers limited. We could be mad as hatters (and often were), but life on the biosphere, including our own, loped right along despite our foolishness. That is no longer the case. As a species, we've become way too successful for our own good. Life on earth is predicated on balanced interdependence, and over the past three centuries, humans have divorced ourselves from nature and disrupted the balance.

While we certainly need sanity, competence, and maturity from our leaders and policy makers, that alone won't be enough to keep civilization from imploding. No Savior is coming to save us from ourselves. A change for the better in humanity's collective consciousness is required. In America particularly, despite

the good intentions and hard work of millions of Americans, most of us remain part of the problem. We live on the electrical grid, travel in cars, consume way too much in resources, participate in an extractive, short-sighted economy, and support (either actively or passively) the Empire. No, individual efforts won't be enough, but weaning ourselves away from the craziness of the status quo is a necessary prerequisite.

The alternative is to wait for everything to blow up, and then hope that collective sanity will magically emerge as a response to disaster, tragedy, loss, and grief. I wouldn't bet on that.

So, cherish your sanity, and do whatever you need to do to protect and increase it. We're going to need as much sanity as we can muster, and everyone can pitch in to help.