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It's a Small World

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A Child's World-View

When I was a small child, I would lie in bed at night and ponder certain “philosophical” questions, as I assume most of us did, questions such as: “What comes after the end of the universe?” or “Where did I come from, and how did I get here?” and “How large is the world?” These and other similar puzzles always came up as I was drifting off to sleep. At the time, I hardly knew that the questions were metaphysical. I did know, however, that they blew fuses in my young kidbrain, and it was both frustrating and fascinating to induce cortical brown-out trying to solve the Mobius Strip riddles.

As I grew and formed myself, seduced by the educational system, I learned the “facts.” I could begin to answer certain of the questions in purely scientific terms. How large is the world? was answered by knowing the earth to be so many miles in circumference and diameter, so many billion tons in weight, occupied by so many oceans and continents, so many human beings, on and on. Having been answered in physical terms, the basic question—How large is the world?—faded into the background. Now, however, it has resurfaced, once again becoming a significant question for me, but in an entirely different way, and for entirely different reasons.

Every individual forms some relation to the reality around him and within him. Call it a philosophy of living, a world-view, a reality framework. Call it whatever you wish. But whatever we call it, this structure includes a vision of the whole earth, a sense of the sheer size of the world. We form opinions about how large

our planet is, about the distances, both physical and psychological, which separate us from one another. We develop a fundamental but often unconscious feel for the diversity of human, earthly life, and we make decisions about the impact of our living together here. The inner vision may be simplistic, yet it may also be extremely complicated, multi-leveled, and even paradoxical in its scope and implication.

The crucial sense I'm developing about the world-views we hold is this: they seem to me to exert a profound effect in the creation of personal destiny, influencing both the direction and the pace of an individual's spiritual evolution. I appreciate how difficult it may be to swallow such a didactic statement. So let me illustrate with an example to which we can all relate.

The President's World-view

Ronald Reagan [*Note: this essay was written in 1984*] sees the world as both very large and very small simultaneously. In his approach to basic living, he feels the world to be a huge place, so vast that what individuals choose to do have relatively small impact on other individuals. His economic leanings reflect this orientation—he believes in a “free market” philosophy, one with minimal constraints, an ideal based on his vision of the earth as an enormous place of infinite resources.

On the other hand, he sees nations as existing in a very small space. He feels the Soviets pressing up against us in Cuba and Latin America. He's concerned about the spread of communism, and thus the effect on his own living, or at least that of his children and their children, and all the children of his fellow countrymen. So in terms of national defense, he sees a tiny but divided world, one where each neighbor must pay close attention to the boundaries of his personal territory, one where strong and armed defense is not only strategic, but mandatory.

Many of our more conservative leaders share this contradictory worldview. Personally, I do not.

I grew up in a uniformly small world, a world defined physically by ultra-middle-class, California-ranch-style suburban planned tract houses, all functionally identical, neat and clean, nestled on their one-third acre of USDA agri-tested hybrid sod grass. My parents bought one. And when I say bought, I mean more than the fact that they plunked down their \$14,000 in 1951, when I was a mere two years old. I mean further that they bought the dream, The Great American Dream—post-World War II, baby booming, “let's get back to the good life All-American DREAM.”

And in truth, I cannot fault them for that dream, however much it may seem insular and fantasy-based during my more aggravated moments of remembering childhood angst.

Our Parents and What They Created

My parents were good Americans. Solid citizens, and members of the generation that “made the world safe for democracy.” Their attitudes were formed out of mother-flag-apple-pie naiveté (at least in light of more recent and well-earned cynicism). Still, when genocidal fascism threatened to take over Europe, that

threat was very real indeed, and our fathers offered their lives to stop the spread of this human aberration.

That generation of Americans was tested very early. They were tested, and they passed with flying colors. Mere teen-agers, they faced their spiritual crisis armed with all the illusions culture provides (“War is fun, a great romantic adventure, etc.”), they discovered the horror of it all, and yet they grit their teeth and pushed through, all the way to VE and VJ days. Most of them survived, but many were scarred, made old before their time. No wonder they longed to return to a world that never really existed except in their own dreams and cultural propaganda. No wonder they created the complacency of the 1950’s. They were finished, finished early, and they could settle back to jobs and homes and families, to living the good life. They devoted their energies to maintaining the status quo and making money by creating businesses with two main goals: consumer goods and weapons of destruction.

Driven slightly mad by the holocaust of a world gone insane before their eyes, they turned their energies to making a buck through better eye shadow, instant pudding, bigger cars, and plastic clothes. Artificial everything, as long as it made money and—not insignificantly—satisfied the desire for easier, more convenient living. They created the consumer culture, where all our wants and needs would be fulfilled. Or at least that was the implied promise.

In so doing, our parents created a setting for us, the baby-boomers, a childhood environment unlike anything that ever existed before. They wanted to make their worlds, and their children’s worlds, stable, dependable, and insulated from the horrors of depression and war.

But their vision backfired, of course. In trying to insulate themselves from the nightmares so often produced by human beings, our parents created a sanitized, sanforized, pasteurized world—a world where the ersatz replaced the authentic. Who wanted real life when fake life was so much better?

Television Versus Real Life

World War II provoked the creation of various communication technologies that radically altered the size of the world. Foremost among the various products that emerged in the post-war consumer marketplace was television.

I was a TV baby. I don’t remember when we first bought a TV, but it must have been very early in my life, well before I was five years old.

By the time I was eight years old, I was virtually a walking *TV Guide*. I could tell you what program was on every channel (there were only three back then in pre-cable days) at any hour of day or night, and I could give an accurate synopsis of what each program was about, as well as a pretty fair critique of the show, at least as seen through an eight year-old’s eyes.

I loved TV. It was my window on the world, an escape route into the kind of excitement my real environment neither provided nor permitted. In fairness, my childhood surroundings contained a fair amount of stimulation. The burgeoning suburbs provided the paradox of perfect, planned living right alongside a tumult of industrial change, and this change was perfect for the fantasies of kidhood.

At the end of my backyard was a fence. Behind the fence was 20 feet of wild scrub land, then a ten-foot drop to an old freight-line rail bed with gently rusting tracks. Further on was a half-mile of pasture-like flatland, and a creek, dark with moss and industrial grunge. Beyond the creek was a steep hillside, again filled with scrub and trees, rising for about a hundred feet, and at the top was the Promised Land—the Shopping Center, with its Woolworth's and Rexall Drug Stores, supermarkets and Shoe Repair palaces. The whole environment was a child's dream world.

The railroad tracks, with their occasional and unpredictable rumbling freights, were a source of constant interest. Where did the trains come from? Where were they going? The flat plain beyond was a source of continual delight. It had been graded for a small industrial park, but years passed before any construction began, so for the bulk of my childhood, I inherited the land. Erosion worked miracles. Huge gullies were formed, sometimes over six feet deep and three feet wide, and the gullies formed themselves into a network of snaking trenches. These resembled nothing so much as the battlefields of World War I (which we saw on TV), and thus they became a perpetual playground for me and my friends. Forts were built and manned, trenches taken and lost in a seemingly endless series of mock battles.

I participated in these games of childhood, but I wasn't as daring as many of my playmates. Never quite comfortable with my body, I felt more tuned to mental risks than physical ones. For instance, when we walked through our fantasy-land to get to the Shopping Center, an almost daily ritual, we had to cross the creek. This involved one of two techniques. Either we had to ford the creek at one of its shallower points, hopping from stone to stone, almost certainly slipping on the moss-covered rocks, getting our buster browns wet and risking an unceremonial pratfall into the water, or we had to climb across the massive tree which years before had eroded from its bank and fallen across the water. This was more exciting, more a test of macho skill, and thus the more preferred route. Some of my friends would dance across the huge trunk, flirting with the waters some ten feet below. I, on the other hand, never one to court physical danger, usually crawled across on my hands and knees, sacrificing face in the rituals of kidpride in favor of keeping fear down to a manageable level—in my stomach rather than my throat.

I preferred the imaginary excitement of TV to the more real, if harmless excitement of my physical world. Yes, I read books also; I wasn't simply a boob tube junkie, a mere slave to *The One-Eyed Monster*. But the "faraway places" of literature no longer seemed so far away. They came into my living room every day through the miracle of the cathode ray tube.

What TV Brought Me

I watched everything. Sitcoms, westerns, detective shows, comedy-varieties, sports, movies, drama.

Playhouse 90 did not escape me; the political sociology of Paddy Chayefsky was imprinted into my young brain right alongside the cosmic wisdom of Mr. Ed ("*a horse is a horse, of course, of course, but no one can talk to a horse, of course, unless, of course, the horse, of course, is the famous Mr. Ed...*").

I experienced the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat with *Wide World of Sports*. I didn't have to go to the ballpark, I could see it on TV. I saw Bob Larsen pitch a perfect game in the 1957 World Series; I saw Alan Ameche of the Baltimore Colts defeat the New York Giants in sudden-death overtime in the 1958 NFL championship game (the game that put the NFL on the map, and opened the door to the modern lunacy of professional sports...); I saw the 1960 Olympic Games, the first intensely televised Olympics in history, long before politics made mincemeat of the Games.

I watched old movies by the score, picking up in the process a bizarre sense of American cultural history, Hollywood-style: I strode off to war with Lew Ayres in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, fought beside John Wayne in *The Sands of Iwo Jima* and Audie Murphy in *The Red Badge of Courage*, and returned home from war in *The Best Years of Our Lives*—all this long before Vietnam.

I learned about Crime from Robert Stack in *The Untouchables*, and from James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, and Humphrey Bogart in countless gangster pics.

I became expert on the slapstick of Laurel and Hardy, the Three Stooges, Abbott and Costello. Lucille Ball, Carole Burnett, and Soupy Sales taught me the TV versions of comedy.

I learned the metaphysics of science—don't go messing around with mother nature—from horror films of every genre, from classics like *Frankenstein* (wasn't Boris Karloff a great monster!) through B-flicks like *Attack of the Crab Monsters*. The threat of radioactivity was not lost on me, since I was menaced by a virtual menagerie of radioactive mutants: giant ants, giant flies, giant rodents, giant "blobs," etc. Outer space was in my own living room. "...Beam me up, Scotty."

I saw every Our Gang/Little Rascals feature ever made, and those imaginary ragamuffins were my best friends—Spanky, Alfalfa, Buckwheat, et al. Darla gave me my first inkling into what feminists would later rage about, the subjugation of women into Barbi Doll caricatures. I never trusted Darla as far as I could throw her, although no doubt she's lurking down there in my subconscious along with all the other absurd images of male/female role-playing I absorbed.

Sex and Other Mysteries

Lord knows, the TV executives of the '50's did everything they could to shield my tender, young kidself from the overramping of sexual awareness. At least, they paid superficial lipservice to it by presenting an endless string of boring TV families reaffirming the squeaky-clean, safe and sound, White Middle Class Good Life, from *Father Knows Best*, through *Ozzie and Harriet*, to *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Donna Reed Show*. All the TV families in these shows all lived in nice houses with nice yards and nice neighbors, in nice small towns. They were nice people. The fathers were wise and knowing, the mothers infinitely patient, and these TV parents loved nothing better than manipulating their children into nice little morality lessons.

But since it's the very essence of TV's business to titillate, sex inevitably slipped through the morality netting. One fine Saturday afternoon when I was about six, I watched Marlene Dietrich's famous saloon cat-fight in *Destry Rides Again*. It was a western, and therefore suitable for youngsters in the minds of the local TV station's programmers; little did they realize what they were showing me.

Marlene plays Frenchy, a dance hall and bordello owner, a lady of very shady means. Frenchy is confronted by the angry, puritanical wife of a farmer she's seduced and cheated, and the two of them proceed to have one of the greatest brawls in all of Hollywood history. In front of a hundred men in the saloon, they kick and scream and bite and claw for all of five minutes, tearing each other's dresses off in the process. This cat fight culminates with a young James Stewart dumping a tub of water over both women, leaving them disheveled and soaked in their undergarments. Such was my first taste of the forbidden fruit of gutter sexuality. And me a mere six years old at the time. Yum.

I grew up watching two-dimensional stereotypes of morality versus sexuality, covering the whole history of American cultural mores. I learned what was permissible and what wasn't. I learned about the Hayes Act, and how husbands and wives had to be shown sleeping in separate beds. (Funny, no parents in my neighborhood had separate beds...). I learned that husbands always went limp at childbirth, turning from strong, dominant protectors into Dagwood Bumsteads with two left feet. I wondered why you always had to boil water when a baby was born? I learned that every woman's dream was to catch a man in marriage, and that every man's dream was to avoid the trap. I wondered why women acted so dumb when I knew damn well they were every bit as smart as men. Further, I wondered why women put all that makeup gunk on their faces—what were they hiding? And why did they pour themselves into dresses after literally tying themselves up in bras and panty girdles? Why did they wear high heels, for God's sake? Those shoes not only looked ridiculous, but must have been agony to walk in. Why were women always the victims in horror movies? Why did they always stumble and fall when running from the monster? Must have been the high heels.

Well, now it's more than four decades later, and I still don't know why women did (and do) these things to themselves, but what's clear to me now that wasn't then is that I'm just as big a boob as every other schmuck on the block. I see how imprinted I am on all the strange images of femaleness I once questioned so naively. A nice-looking woman in a skirt and high heels can turn my head from fifty feet. I can virtually feel myself degenerating into a veritable sexual predator. And this in spite of every effort on the part of television censors to shield me from such licentiousness.

I studied law with Raymond Burr on *Perry Mason*, and encountered the political process with Gary Cooper in *Meet John Doe*. I saw early on what nonsense politics could be by watching the Democratic and Republican conventions on TV. And I learned what madness politics can be in the shock of JFK's assassination. Television showed me and millions of others what a sham national security was as Jack Ruby gunned down Lee Harvey Oswald right there on Live TV, while the Dallas marshalls stood by like buffoons.

Walt Disney used animals to teach me about people, and Marlin Perkins used animals to teach me about animals. Game shows taught me there was no difference by revealing the animal in us all.

I even watched shows like *Industry on Parade*, which was AFL-CIO propaganda for the happy American worker. On those early Sunday mornings after Looney Tunes, Rocky and Bullwinkle, and even Deputy Dawg were over, I'd search the dial (all three channels of it) to escape the homegrown, amateurish religious programs, finally giving in to scenes of factories, assembly lines, and the

“wonders” of automation. I learned how milk is processed, how tires are made, how dishes are mass-produced. I learned about the boon of organized labor, how it had made life swell for the American Worker. I also decided that I did NOT want to be one of those happy American Workers screwing their nine millionth bolt onto their nine millionth nut day after day, week after week, year after year. Not me, brother.

I learned to be skeptical of advertising, even as I was being seduced into consumerism. I watched the endless parade of commercials and marveled at how people could sell so many things. More than how, I wondered why? Why would people want to devote so much time and energy to creating, manufacturing, marketing, advertising, and finally selling all that stuff? Didn't they have anything better to do with their lives than to convince me that I couldn't live without a better mousetrap? The workings of economics were not lost on me, here in the nation where mass production was invented.

The Upshot of It All

All this and much more was available to me, in the comfort of my own home, as they say, not simply an act of imagination (which might well have been far healthier), but in moving pictures, sounds, voices, radiating—quite literally radiating—from a small box in my own house.

The world shrank.

Foreign countries seemed foreign, alright, but not so far away. Distant lands seemed different and strange, but close enough to touch. I imagined the world not as an infinite resource, but instead as a small community planet, and it seemed to me quite certain that the earth and all the life which crawled and rolled and flew and swam and walked its surface, the whole shooting match, was undeniably finite. Small. Contained. And together. Like one community.

The earth herself felt very vulnerable to me as I watched the growth of the human world around me. Urban and suburban sprawl spread like wildfire. Industrial expansion gobbled up land and resources. I could easily imagine the day when there would be no more space, no more resources, when we would have used up the entire planet. What would we do then? And more importantly, what would we do before then to avoid calamity? Why, the sheer amount of trash we produce is enough to boggle the mind. Perhaps we do have enough coal to heat every home in the world for five hundred years, but can you imagine the Pandora's Box which would be opened by trying to get at that coal? What would it do to our landscape to rip open the earth to reveal it? What would happen to the atmosphere if we burned it? What would happen in our bodies?

Where Does This Stuff Come From, Anyway?

I cannot, in good faith, testify that television caused these thoughts and feelings to rise up within me. I cannot in truth say exactly where they came from. Parental imprints? Genetic coding? Education? The massage of mass media or the subtle pressure of the collective unconscious? Perhaps my own inner and intangible spirit reacting to the world around me? Finally, no one knows how we form our world-views. The point is that somehow, each of us does.

My own personal world seems huge. That is to say, the world I have to cope with day by day. It seems overwhelming. There is never enough time or energy or motivation to deal with all the things asking to be dealt with right in my own personal life. Cleaning, cooking, washing clothes, working with clients, answering the phone, maintaining the car, filing and organizing the mounds of crap in my office, exercising, fitting in trips and vacations and seminars. It's all too, too much. A world beyond control, out of order, vaster than I can handle, although I have managed so far.

But the BIG WORLD, the one that stretches beyond my personal environment for twelve thousand miles in either direction, the world that contains almost six billion other human beings all struggling to maintain and evolve their own personal lives, that world seems downright tiny to me, almost delicate in its vulnerability.

The Perspective of Numbers

Numbers give me fits. When I try to comprehend the sheer amount of stuff it takes to conduct ordinary human business, my brain struggles to keep perspective, to keep the ideas these numbers represent in some sort of human scale. Inevitably, the result is emotional overload.

I remember when the first McDonald's appeared in my suburb. It was one of the initial wave of Mac's, the early-50s-style fast food stand with fifty-foot arches as an integral part of the building's design. I can still remember being impressed by the little sign which proudly stated, "Over 300,000 sold." That was difficult enough to comprehend. Well, friends, I don't eat at McDonald's anymore; fast food is not my forte. But less than thirty years later, the sign now says, "Over 45 billion sold." Forty-five BILLION. That's 45,000,000,000 hamburgers. [*Note: this essay was written in 1984. The numbers now, as of 2002, are staggering beyond belief.*] And these figures represent sales for just one fast food chain. They don't include Burger King, Wendy's, Hardee's, or any of the other fast-food hamburger-hawkers.

Do you have any idea how many cows it takes to make 45 billion hamburgers? And how much grain it takes to feed those cows? And how many billion tons of chemical fertilizer and pesticides are dumped into the land to grow that grain? And how much of that pesticide now resides in our bodies? Do the people selling these hamburgers really believe they're providing good food? What motivates them to do it?

It Ain't Much, But It's a Living

The bottom line, of course, is to survive, to earn a living, to support spouses and children, to give grandma the operation the doctors say she needs, to keep grandpa in the nursing home, to buy the new lawn mower to go with the house and the car in the driveway. In short, what motivates burger-pushers is precisely the same drive that motivated my parents and yours, the same thing that's motivated people for thousands of years: to get by, and in getting by, to possibly get a little something extra for themselves and their children.

That same motivation causes otherwise nice people to design, create, produce, market, and perpetuate nasty little items like napalm and nerve gas and intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear reactors and pornography and

asbestos insulation. To get by, to survive by not giving a damn about the other fellow, or even if you do give a damn (as most of us finally do), to rationalize what you're doing as necessary or inevitable—"someone's gonna do it, so it might as well be me." You can bet that if there's a dollar to be made, someone is making it.

The Hierarchy of Needs

My grandfather died when my father was 17 years old. At the time, my father was a young symphony violinist—not the great virtuoso of the age, but a solid talent. It was, however, 1932, the height of the Great Depression, and when my grandfather died, my father was suddenly the sole support for his family. He managed to find a job, put down the violin, and never picked it up again. Art, creativity, and the life of the spirit went right out the window. The "bottom line" took over. My father became a businessman, and a good one, but he also became a driven workaholic. His entire development as a human being was dramatically altered by the need to make a living, the need to survive and provide for others.

Focusing on God, Consciousness, and the Oneness of all human beings is damned difficult when you don't know where your next meal is coming from. Survival comes first; it's right there in the brain stem, the lurking ancestral memories from antiquity, harkening back to the first creatures ever to crawl out of the slime. It's primordial ambition, the desire to survive and prosper, to get one's personal share of this amazing world, and screw the other guy if he gets in your way. What the hell, he's not family—he's not "us," he's "them," and he'll take it from you if you don't get it first.

In 1973, I spent my last footloose summer working in Chevy Chase, Maryland, as a continental waiter. Red jacket, black tie, flambé this and flourish that. The works, very fancy. One of the other waiters was a Greek immigrant named Nikos. He was 55 or so years old, a career waiter, and he was damned good at his job. He worked hard, he made lots of money, and he had a reputation as a tough guy. You didn't want to get in his way, because if you inadvertently took one of his tables, if you cost him a tip, he just might just cut your throat. I carefully steered clear. But he invited me to his home for dinner one Sunday, and I saw a completely different side to the man. Once in his home, he was a pussycat, the nicest person I'd ever met, someone who'd give you the shirt right off his back. I met his wife and learned that he was putting three children through college. That's why he was such a tough guy—he loved his family. He'd have killed to protect them.

For Nikos, blood was indeed thicker than water. His sense of family was absolute, his love profound, but both were narrow and territorial. He had two worlds, the one "inside," which included his home and everyone he cared for, and the one "outside," which he thought of as a competitive, predatory, dangerous jungle.

The history of the human species is apparently conditioned, very basically and very deeply, by this dualism. Survival, ambition, protection of one's own at the expense of all others. That family imperative is downright awesome.

Does this mean I'm looking down my nose at others from the rarified heights of moral righteousness and ethical purity? Does it mean I believe money to be the root of all evil? Does it mean I think we all should stop everything we're doing

because it might possibly be harmful to somebody somewhere? The answer to each of the questions is a resounding, "No." The tone of this essay may occasionally become shrill; I know how easy it is to point an accusing finger at others, waxing didactic, lapsing into diatribe. But far from being immune to the pitfalls of human living, I feel very strongly that I, too, am one of the fools caught in the illusion.

On the golf course of life, the sand traps of blind self-interest and the water holes of moral sleepwalking line a very narrow fairway of karma-free Right Action. Hell, I don't think I've ever made par on this course yet. We are all Bozo's on this bus, as far as I know.

The Point

The point, of course, is that finally, we live in this world together. It's a single, small planet we call home, and it's getting smaller all the time.

Almost to a person, every astronaut who has orbited the earth or gone to the moon has reported on the intensity, shock, and awe of seeing our world from such a distance. Each has commented on how remarkable it is to see the earth as a single whole, to feel how all men are neighbors on this very small, bright, blue-green planet. Somehow, these comments always strike me as slightly absurd. I mean to take nothing away from the astronauts; they have experienced a very unique and rare moment of clarity about our human predicament, the dance we all share. But I wonder to myself, how did the astronauts see the world *before* they had these experiences? Did they have to leave the earth to realize that it is indeed a singular place, more like a village than a vast planet? And what of the rest of us who are not members of the small, select elite who will be privileged to see earth from afar?

It's risky to make generalizations about what *all* human beings feel or think or hope or fear. I don't know every person on the earth, and while the desire is strong to find common threads that link me with the others of my race, so also is the awareness that I may be projecting my own peculiar reality outward onto the world, seeing in others only an illusory mirror of those qualities in myself yet to be understood, a mirage made from the unassimilated contents of my own spiritual journey.

To see oneself in others

Can we evolve enough to recognize the fundamental, essential Oneness of our species and our home world, without being trapped in the vortex of our own fears? Can we remember gentleness in spite of our own long-proven aggression? Can we learn to get on with the necessities of our individual lives without decimating the environment and destroying all higher life forms on this planet? Can we live together in peace despite the world's being fragmented into a million shards? And finally, can we truly grow up when so many of our lives are filled with the disturbed remnants of resolved childhoods?

Some of us will. Some of us won't. Given how much is riding on it, I pray that enough of us do.

