

Ignorance and Hubris

by Bill Herbst

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Among the human qualities that might comprise a list of saving graces, one might presume that ignorance wouldn't be included. Surely human ignorance wouldn't be considered a source of possible salvation. I'm not so sure, though.

We are living in a time of collective insanity — as was true through much of the 20th century and continues in this still young 21st century — a time of underlying anxiety and mounting fear from dire threats of our own creation, a time of cruelty and violence, with deep, tribal divisions between us, made even more extreme by the resurgence of hatred. Also, we are (and have always been) remarkably contentious. Getting collective humanity to agree on anything is damn near impossible. Given where we are, humanity needs all the help we can get.

What is not in doubt is human cleverness and ingenuity. Our big brains attest to that, but we are still motivated in large part by our ancestral brain stem and limbic midbrain, with their autonomic and emotional/hormonal circuitry. The neocortex, with its reasoning functions, is a recent evolutionary development, effectively the new kid on the brain block, and still takes its marching orders from older levels of the nervous system. This translates in our being aggressively competitive, with a profound (and quite disturbed) drive toward domination, whether of other human beings, any other living species, or even the earth itself.

But aggressiveness and disagreement are not our undoing. Arrogance is. That's the source of our disconnect from nature, and it's what twists the Us-versus-Them hard-wiring of our brains into something monstrous.

Ignorance is not stupidity. Nor is it necessarily a state of unconsciousness or non-awareness, although that's not always an easy argument to make, given how apparently unconscious many human beings are. Perversely, though, ignorance might just be an antidote to the arrogance that got us into all this trouble. What is that arrogance? It's believing that we are separate from Nature, that the material earth exists solely for the fulfillment of our own human purposes, as lifeless resource to be plumbed, manipulated, and transformed to satisfy our desires and fulfill our fantasies. In Greek tragedy, arrogance is called *hubris*, which leads to nemesis — an inevitable downfall.

Arrogance presumes that what is known is true and sufficient. There is no doubt, no questioning of assumptions, and no consideration that anything further need be understood. That's a recipe for disaster.

Human beings are not the Masters of the Universe. We're not separate from Nature, and we're sure as hell not superior to it. However much we know (or think we know) is still dwarfed by what we don't know. In other words, ignorance is our natural state, but often we won't or can't accept that, so we choose arrogance instead.

Why might ignorance be a good thing? How could our ignorance possibly be a benefit rather than a liability?

When I was a kid in the 1950s, the big fear was nuclear war — the Bomb. That terror is still with us, but now we've added catastrophic climate disruption and the distinct possibility of global economic collapse.

Over the past couple of years, we've heard a steadily increasing chorus of voices from science and social critics warning us that civilization is careening toward disaster. I consider myself one of those voices, and I'm not happy about it. Things are bad, it's said, and they're going to get much, much worse. Humanity may even go extinct in the foreseeable future (some suggest much sooner than later). In the worst case scenario, we will take with us much of the rest of life on earth. It now appears that we're already headed down the road into another mass extinction event, this one caused by us.

This doomsday meme is gaining traction in the zeitgeist. Even people who are able to distract themselves from the general tone of anxiety are quite probably aware of it. They may not act concerned or fearful, but I'm guessing that a majority of the public is worried. Short of doomsday, we live now in a country in the throes of increasingly polarized political and cultural conflict. Even if our species survives and civilization muddles through, America as an empire and perhaps even as a nation may be coming apart at the seams right in front of our eyes.

Accurately predicting the future is notoriously difficult. As an astrologer, I understand this better than many people. Even when you get the tone and symbolism right, the actual specifics of how life will unfold in circumstance and what that will lead to are very elusive.

I think back to all the predictions I've read, seen, or heard over my lifetime about the future of humanity. This includes books and movies made before I was born. Every now and then, one of them contained some specific element that turned out in hindsight to have been uncannily prescient. Most the time, however, these futurist prognostications were wrong — not necessarily dead wrong, but substantially wrong. The future that actually happened didn't

resemble the forecasts, and didn't feel like them, either. Maybe the future was better, maybe worse, but always different.

I'm not sure that humanity has ever actually solved any of the recurring problems we've faced. Life just moved on. Old problems changed and morphed into new problems. Later the old problems returned, sometimes in new forms, sometimes in the same old way.

Left to our own devices, to our considerable but limited intelligence, the future looks pretty bleak at this point. We may know a lot, but the arrogance that emerged with civilization crippled us. Maybe we can change that.

Yes, our ignorance might be part of our undoing. But it could also be part of our moving through this dreadful time, moving to something different.

We are not in charge. We have never been in charge.

We are not in control. We have never been in control.

I'm not suggesting any particular agency that is in charge and in control. Over my lifetime, I've heard most of the "explanations" about that — metaphysical and otherwise. All of them are interesting stories, but I'm not a true believer in any of them.

While I appreciate learning and strive to increase my understanding, I'm also comfortable with not knowing, especially with something as serious as our future.