

I am Not a Journalist

by Bill Herbst

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In the Commentaries I write, I make no particular effort to offer a “fair and balanced” perspective. I’m not a journalist; I’m a commentator. I labor under no compunctions about any need to provide equal time to divergent opinions. Such an ethical guideline may be theoretically sound for reporters, especially when it means giving coverage to equally reasonable but conflicting points of view. Too often these days, however, The Fairness Rule amounts to little more than presenting reality, then being forced to give equal time to gonzo, looney-tunes fantasies, thus conferring upon those perverse illusions the artificial credence of authoritative confirmation.

Also, I’m not a member of the journalistic fraternity that serves the 24/7 news cycle. I feel no responsibility to write about any event or development just because it is deemed “newsworthy.” I write only about what interests me, returning again and again to a handful of topics that inspire my approval or disapproval.

For instance, the deregulation of business that has been underway in America over the past 40 years strikes me as seriously wrong-headed — not merely mistaken in good faith, but downright crazy. In my opinion, those who lobby with near-evangelical zeal and considerable financial clout for deregulation of commerce have their heads up their you-know-whats. They would disagree, of course, but I think they’re wrong. Dead wrong. Removing environmental protection and consumer safeguards from our economic rules are the equivalent of letting the foxes guard the hen house.

I accept that economic activity is the backbone of global civilization and the life-blood of local communities, but late-stage corporate capitalism has amply demonstrated its utter disdain for anything that stands in the way of unfettered pursuit of profits, the material wealth of which is increasingly held by fewer hands. Haves and Have Nots will always exist, of course, but we’ve engineered a civilization that dramatically increases the disparity. Legal constraints by government are the only viable means I see to limit this. And yet, day-in and day-out, endless propaganda floods the airwaves about how wonderful

capitalism is — as if GDP were the only measure that mattered. Americans have been well-trained for a long time to believe that.

Similarly, anyone who holds one group of humans to be inherently “superior” to another — whether that group is a gender, a race, an ethnicity, a religion, or a nationality — is engaging in elitist fantasy. This is not a veiled reference to sports teams and their legions of loyal fans, where contests are decided on the playing fields and the triumphant pleasure of shouting “We’re Number One!” is a temporary condition. No, the presumption of superiority to which I refer is permanent and unjustified. While comparisons between any two groups may reveal differences in respective talents, abilities, skills, and achievements, that’s not the same as conferring upon any particular group the exalted mantle of “The Chosen People,” like the Divine Right of Kings. That bogus old justification for privileged dominance by claiming God’s approval went belly up long ago, even though many people continue to resurrect it.

That said, I don’t regard everyone as equal or the same. Oh, maybe at some Cosmic level we are indeed all One. In the real world we live in here on earth, however, the spectrum of differences is very wide. Some are more blessed, others more cursed, and not always because either condition is deserved. To leaven the caprices of fate by instituting the principle of equality under the law is a worthy social goal, a way of at least slightly leveling the playing field. As with every lofty ideal, though, we always fall short of achieving it. Some people inevitably get better treatment than others from the world, based on what they have or who they know. Working to achieve even modest social equality is difficult as hell, and maintaining it an endless struggle, but the health, sanity, and heart of a society should be judged by the degree to which privileged inequality is limited and the scales of justice kept balanced. Life is not “fair,” but we need to create and structure society as best we can to insure that our treatment of each other is no more unfair than it has to be.

I don’t write these Commentaries for everyone. No, my target audience is a segment of the population whose viewpoint I find to be under-represented. So, who are “we?” We are people who recognize the importance of balance in life, and who understand that concentrations of particular qualities tend to have a detrimental influence. In terms of my writing, the specific qualities that interest me in this regard are power and money. The rich and powerful make the rules that the rest of us have to live by, at least to the extent that we participate in society. The old saying, “*Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely,*” may not be accurate in every instance, but it is largely true in the aggregate. Authority is all too easily abused, sometimes in spectacular fashion, but more often in ways that are subtle, routine, and almost banal.

My natural audience is found among those of us who question authority — whether that of others or our own, and in spite of our natural genetic programming toward obedience to superiors in whatever pecking order we find ourselves. I doubt that soldiers comprise a large percentage of my readership, for such individuals have chosen a path of honor and excellence through the warrior vehicle of the military, which requires respect for the chain of command. Too often, this means automatic and unflagging acquiescence. Follow orders, no matter what. The military accounts for this by building in codes of integrity (i.e., permission not to obey illegal or immoral orders), but, practically speaking, these rules are not generally observed. Most soldiers simply salute and do what their superiors order. Disobedience occurs, of course, but it tends to be shrouded. The same is generally true of all institutional hierarchies. Go along to get along, and resist mostly in secret so as not to be discovered.

The people I write for follow a different road, one that builds in at least the possibility of overt disobedience, of walking alone, without the comforting affirmation of group-belonging through conformity. These are people who perceive that the Emperors are sometimes butt naked, even while cloaked in the glittering raiments of power, privilege, and exalted status. I write for those who are unimpressed and unconvinced by mere displays of grandeur, since a book cannot be judged by its cover, and who look deeper than superficial appearances to confirm the authenticity of any authority's credentials before obeying.

A different way of looking at this is that I write for the "outsider" in each of us, the part of our psyches that remains separate from the hive mind, regardless of how much we may otherwise strive to belong. Whether visible or not, everyone has in some measure a dimension of individuality so extreme as to produce the sense of being alone and isolated. Sometimes that isolation is acute among the very people who seem to belong the most, and about whom we would be surprised to discover even a shred of inward loneliness. I write in the hope of alleviating the debilitating sense of isolation in myself and my readers, however small my impact may be, so that we feel a bit more the kinship of camaraderie with other people, but without denial or forced surrender of what makes us uniquely individual.

None of what I've written here so far is meant to imply that all authority is bogus, all institutions corrupt, and all information untrustworthy. It's just that differentiating the authentic from the bat-shit crazy has become more difficult in recent decades. The manipulations of manufactured consent have always been with us, but we live in an age where psychology and technology have enabled advertising to reach formerly unimagined levels of success. Ideas and beliefs are marketed as aggressively as products. Institutions advertise as much as companies. Public relations is a big deal, and we are all subject to exhaustive market research. Once our personal interests, leanings, and vulnerabilities have

been harvested through data-collection, they can be massaged, reformulated, and fed back to us by an array of techniques from the crude (endless repetition) to the subtle (seductive imagery), all of which increase the chances that we will then want to “buy” whatever is being sold.

Much of what passes for “journalism” these days is actually marketing. The nutso fever swamp of media giant FOX and right-wing web sites or social media purveyors are easy targets to take aim at in this regard, but I’m much more upset about CNN, MSNBC, and PBS. The “liberal” mainstream media trumpets itself as fact-based, trustworthy news reporting, but the selection of *which* facts or stories to report and *how* spin them are hardly objective, independent, and fair-minded.

The slant toward centrism, which is a kind of censorship, isn’t overt, however. No, it’s nuanced — unstated but understood. Corporate boards and newsroom editors don’t have to dictate to reporters which stories to file or producers which to air, nor how to script them. The bias is achieved by a self-selection process. No one has to veto any too-radical pundits on the ubiquitous “expert panels.” Everyone who works in these media outlets knows what is expected and acceptable. Anyone who doesn’t know or who chafes at the approved narrative frameworks either leaves or simply isn’t advanced up the corporate ladder.

In our current political mess, socialism is outside the acceptable pro-capitalism perspective. The word socialism is used derisively, and anyone who identifies as socialist is dealt with more harshly by reporters and anchors. Universal health care, such as Medicare for All, is typically presented with the critique of unaffordability. Reductions in military spending are not even considered. But then, politics is a cesspool. Always has been and remains so today.

So, to come full circle back to the title of this post, I am not a journalist. I don’t report “news” or offer objective information. I’m a guy with strong opinions, which is not to suggest that I’m right. Despite my intention to work in the direction of humility, I’m vain and fallible. The last thing I want is to convince or seduce you to believe what I write. I do hope, however, that these brief commentaries might reach some readers who are on parallel life-journeys, thus amounting to a friendly wave from my lane to yours as we go down the road into an ever more uncertain future.