

Saturn:

Experiencing the Authority Within

(Part Two of Three)

by Bill Herbst

This week's Commentary post is the second installment of this revised reprint of my 1985 essay on Saturn. In this installment, the metaphor of childhood resistance and denial plays out through various escape strategies.

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escape strategies

So what do you do as a five-year-old, now that you're stuck at the dinner table? Why, you'd look for a way to get out of eating your peas, of course. And for that, kids have two main strategies. One is denial, the other is pretense.

The first strategy (denial) could be called *Avoidance-of-the-Problem*. This boils down to our kid pretending that he isn't actually caught at the table, that he's not really a prisoner, and that his peas don't really exist at all. So, he plays with his napkin or puts his fingers in his water glass or squirms in his chair. Perhaps he fantasizes that he's riding in a space ship and the peas are the alien target of his seek-and-destroy mission. Anything to escape, by blocking the problem completely. The old four-walls-do-not-a-prison-make gambit.

And with our own lives, we often do the same thing. *What do you mean, I have a problem?* Certainly not. *What do you mean I'm afraid?* Afraid of what? Why should I be afraid? I don't see anything to be afraid of. Me afraid? No way. *What do you mean I'm inadequate?* Me inadequate? Never.

But this is truly a ploy, and one that succeeds only temporarily if at all. The problem for our five-year-old is that his attention span is much shorter than his father's. The father watches, continues eating dinner, and waits patiently, ready to discipline any overly rowdy escape behaviors, knowing full well that his child will exhaust the whole repertoire of time/space fantasies in about two minutes.

Similarly, the authority-within can outwait our elaborately conceived escape plots. It knows that our "What-Me-Worry?" attitude is doomed to fail. Ultimately, reality wins out over fantasy. And the reality inside each of us is that we have certain areas of hard work awaiting us, certain pre-defined metaphysical paths of achievement, certain gradual transformations of fear into accomplishment. It's a complex and awesome alchemy of defeat into victory, one which is engineered by the slow processes of effort and exertion, rather than by the adrenaline rush of fight-or-flight.

So even if our child is able to muster the courage to play with the peas on his plate, to move them around like toy soldiers hoping to fool himself into believing that some magical change has taken place to restore his freedom, he will have to return — eventually for him and rather quickly for his father — to the unpleasant reality staring up at him from his plate. He's trapped. There is no escape.

Many of us complain woefully and long — if not to others at least to ourselves — about the great tragedies in our lives. We complain that we have tried, oh how we have tried, but the obstacles placed in our path are too great. We can't stand it anymore. It is just too much for us (and much too unfair anyway). We doth protest too much, methinks, for often what we are complaining about are not failures in true experience, but disappointments in fantasy and escapism. We are bemoaning the fact that we cannot get away. The failure of this first ploy is mainly self-deception, usually accompanied by complex rationalization and astonishingly selective perception. "*But Dad, you've made me sit here for hours!*" [Actually, it has been less than five minutes...] "*Eating those peas will make me barf!*" [Actually, they'll go right down without so much as a second of real pain...]

But if at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Which brings us to ploy number two, a cunning strategy we might call *Do-It-without-Experiencing-It*. If the first plan — pretending the problem doesn't exist — is typically more universal for children, then this second artifice is more common to adults.

Having exhausted his resources for mental escape, our child at the dinner table is faced with only two remaining options. Since he can't get away, he can sit at the table and be miserable in his imprisonment — which is a fate too awful to contemplate — or he can eat his peas and be done with it, thus freeing himself. So he resolves to eat his peas. But not quite, not honestly.

Children are remarkably Machiavellian in their scheming, although their sophistication may be lacking, and what our five-year-old resolves to do is pile as many peas on his spoon as he can manage, and — carefully now, since the delicacy of balancing nineteen peas on a spoon is no easy trick for a five-year-old — cram them all into his mouth at once while holding his nose with the other hand so as not to have to taste them, and then swallow without chewing. *Gulp*. This is a radical technique, but for a child in the fearful state of anxiety, it's much preferable to actually tasting those horrid little green balls. He hopes this will fool his father into thinking he's done the dirty deed.

Great numbers of us use this ploy in our adulthoods to deal with the rigors of the Saturn experience. We conform to the *letter* of the law while violating the *spirit* of the law. "See," we say, "We complied and did what was required." Well, not really.

It's hard to grow up for real. One measure of maturity involves transforming anxieties into achievements, building a deeper capacity for experience in those certain, special areas of our private inadequacies and fearful oversensitivities.

While many of us make efforts in these directions, we are often better at “talking the talk” than “walking the walk.” Sophistication increases without maturity. We tend to substitute behavioral short-cuts, ways of just “getting through it.” It’s as if we have emotionally short-circuited ourselves in finding sometimes simple but more often elaborate scenarios for dealing with our fears and doubts. We succumb to Shakespeare’s “tangled web” of deception.

But who are we short-sheeting in this deception? Sometimes others, but always ourselves. We rationalize our brains out, and if necessary, we lie our asses off. Our true role calls for conscious, full-hearted awareness; too often, we offer mostly bravado and bombast.

I’m not lobbying here for a cynically negative view of human nature. I believe the bulk of humanity to be composed of people with essentially good hearts and the best of intentions. Sincere contrition and authentic remorse are not rare experiences for most of us. When we come around to realizing the damage we may have done to ourselves or others through denial, rationalization, deception, or any other form of personal irresponsibility, we can at times be quite noble in our desire to make things right. But that is usually well after the fact.

Day-in and day-out, human beings exhibit a near-pathological tendency to hide from the truth in moments of confrontation with our inner authorities, especially as these take shape in and are reflected by outer circumstances. Trapped between a rock and a hard place, we revert to the brain-stem cunning of our animal ancestry in a semi-conscious effort to protect our egos from being ripped away, and the magnificent, logical structures of our neocortexes are suddenly slaves to our terrified emotions.

We transform instantly into confidence artists running low-life scams, selling the Brooklyn Bridge, swamp land in Florida, Rolex knock-offs, and feelthy French postcards to an unsuspecting world that had no intention of triggering our hysteria. But the world quickly senses that something is rotten in Denmark.

Everything in our vibration quivers, and the vibrational lie detector needles fly off the chart. You can fool some of the people some of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can’t fool all the people all the time.

In this second strategy we are no longer trying to fool ourselves, although that often continues to occur, but we are trying to “get away with murder,” attempting to deceive the authority-within into letting us off the hook. With the first ploy, we endeavor to fool ourselves; with the second, we set out to fool the world. Neither works.

The child may enter into manipulative negotiations with his father: *“But Dad, you said I only had to eat half of them.”* [Actually, he has eaten a mere two spoonfuls. The rest of the peas are hidden under the slice of Wonder Bread.] He may throw tantrums: *“You’re a terrible father! If you loved me, you wouldn’t do this! I hate you!”* [Actually, the child doesn’t hate his father; he’s just frustrated. And the father loves his child very much.]

Much of the time, the father sees right through these gambits. In that event, he is able to maintain both his composure and his firm resolve. The level of our psyche symbolized by Saturn is remarkably cool in the face of the most intense pressure from the frightened ego. We can beg, plead, and cajole to no avail. Saturn looks us straight in the eye and says, *"This is reality. Stop whining and accept it. Stop bitching and deal with it. Stop resisting and move through it. Stop denying and experience it."*

But even the most patient father has a limit. He may lose his cool and slap the child, a tragedy for everyone involved. He may partially succumb and send the child to his room, a punishment that is only a pyrrhic victory, since the child escapes eating his peas and may regard the paradise of his room as a victory over his father. Or the father may cave in completely, throw up his hands, and give in to any of the ploys his child attempts, releasing him completely from the selected responsibility.

If, on the other hand, the child succeeds in deceiving his father into thinking that he ate his peas when in fact he didn't, then he achieves his immediate objective, freedom from the dinner table. But in so doing he sets up a lie that he will have to deal with later. There is the issue of false pride, often accompanied by unconscious guilt. Additionally, damage to the father-child relationship may occur. What the father doesn't know won't hurt him, but the memory of the lie persists in our five-year-old's conscience, creating a psychological distance from his father. Momentary descent into cunning creates the need for later, more complex rationalizations. What was intended to be felt as a loving interaction and teaching moment becomes gradually more an adversary contest — a competition where all that matters is winning.

In most of our lives, habit structures are developed for doing what we don't like without truly "tasting" it. We get around the authority-within by justifying to it and to ourselves that we have indeed done what we had to do, what we were supposed to do. We don't grow, we just become more sophisticated in faking it. And as these structures deepen over the years, our relation to the authority-within grows more corrupted.

This inner authority is not separate from our egos. It is a part of ourselves — not something outside. We are spiritually entitled to love all our facets, which includes our inner authority. But most of us end up fighting ourselves. We have met the enemy and he is us. So what can (or should) we do to grow up, to love ourselves? How do we gracefully relax into ourselves — all of our selves — including our inner father? Sometimes it's easier to finally start climbing our mountains than trying to make the damn things go away.

end Part Two

*In next week's final installment (Part Three) of **Saturn: Experiencing the Authority Within**, we'll shift metaphors from childhood resistance and denial to the daunting challenges of mountain-climbing.*