

Staying Sane

by Bill Herbst

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Of the many questions that arise for me about the current state of American madness, some are easily answered, while others remain mysterious. Well, not exactly “mysterious” in any cosmic sense, just more difficult to assess practically and address with any certainty.

For instance, consider a particular question I ask myself: *“Is the rampant insanity I see and feel in the zeitgeist (meaning on the screens of the American media landscape — online news and commentary, social media posts, books, podcasts, YouTube videos, etc. — real and objectively accurate, or am I misperceiving it, perhaps by projecting my own subjective weirdness onto it?”* For me, that question has an obvious answer: No, I’m not mistaken.

Sure, I might be overlaying some of my personal biases, fears, and neuroses onto what I pick up from the world — that’s likely to happen to at least some extent with damn near everything we perceive and conclude. But it doesn’t mean that I’m wrong. I think back to the halcyon days of my youth in the radical subcultures of the 1960s and 70s, to a slogan that was popular at the time: *“Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean that they’re not actually out to get you.”* Rim shot. The same logic applies here: Whatever my own personal delusions are, I’m as certain as I can be that what I’m picking up from my collective radar has considerable validity.

Here’s another question with an obvious answer: *Is the madness that’s sweeping through America like a psychic pandemic a recent or new phenomenon, or do its roots go back a long way?* The answer to that question is also clear: No, this isn’t new. The roots of our current derangement go back as far as one cares to look.

But then I ask myself: *“Are Americans crazier than we were before, or are the delusions being vomited up now simply more obvious and less veiled than they were in the past?”* That question is more difficult for me to answer, especially since our past is pockmarked with eruptions of violence large and small. Overall, though, I’m inclined to think that in terms of percentages we’re probably not much more insane now than we were throughout most of American history.

Back then, there were no smart phones, no social media, no instantaneous communication platforms nor algorithms that allowed shockingly sudden concentrations of public delusion, such as we have now. People’s crazy ideas

were more cloistered in the past, more veiled by distance and isolation. Now they are immediately amplified in perverse social approval.

So no, I don't think we're crazier now than we were in the past, but the landscape has changed profoundly. And we're markedly different as a people than we were 170 years ago. Say what we will about the conquest of the continent and genocidal displacement of indigenous native Americans by European immigrants. Those were some tough, hardy motherfuckers who set out in Conestoga wagons on the Oregon trail in 1850. Modern Americans couldn't even begin to undertake such journeys without the luxury of their SUVs and F-150 pickups. Or, better yet, just hop aboard an airplane and skip the drive entirely. Of course, air travel is a little dicey these days, what with COVID and all. The point is simply that compared to our ancestors, we're soft.

Another question I grapple with on an almost daily basis is: *"How can we best protect ourselves against further infection by the madness?"* I started to address that in my commentary of two weeks ago ("Seeking Refuge"). While I don't wish to bore my readers by repeating the same opinions over and over, that question can't be adequately addressed in only three or four pages. So, I'll add more here from a slightly different slant.

My basic presumption is obvious: Madness is afoot in the land, everywhere, and while it may not be as literally deadly as the SARS Co-V 2 virus, it's equally debilitating. We are all exposed and may become infected. As with COVID, the symptoms of the insanity pandemic vary widely from one person to the next. Some people aren't infected. They remain as sane or crazy as they were before. Others are infected but show no symptoms. The oldest among us — which in this metaphor means not only senior citizens like myself, but literally all our social institutions — are most vulnerable and dangerously at risk. Unlike COVID, though, there are no vaccines, and no end in sight to the spread of contagion.

I believe firmly that some measure of "goodness" continues to reside within, well, nearly everyone. There's more than enough love in the world, but how that love is allocated and distributed leaves much to be desired. The risk we face is that disturbed illusions and toxic fantasies will relegate our common humanity to a back seat. That's been the case throughout history, but we can no longer afford to love only a select few while not caring at all about everyone else. If we continue down that road, the butcher's bill will be enormous.

Over my lifetime, but more pointedly over the past two decades, I've become convinced that American culture and modern civilization are irretrievably deranged. Whatever hopes I held in my youth about our choosing a gentler, more generous future have not withstood the test of time. All the optimistic arguments to the contrary about the presumed goodness of America and happy outcomes for our collective future are now completely unconvincing to me.

As I wrote recently, the monsters have won, and the rest of us possess neither the strength nor the sanity to prevent the runaway train of Death Culture from destroying the world. I don't pretend to have a clear vision or obvious prediction for how that destruction will look, nor for how bad it might be, but the evidence that collapse has already begun is all around us. To not see that requires willfully sticking one's head in the sand.

A quote I like that is attributed to English playwright Oscar Wilde comes to mind once again:

*"There are two great tragedies in life.
One is not getting what you want.
The other is getting it."*

For a long time, humans didn't get what we wanted, at least not enough to satisfy us. We longed for the power to manifest our fantasies by manipulating the external environment and changing the natural world. For most of our history, we had to settle for dreaming. Now our dreams displace reality almost instantly. Over the past 200 years, we have gotten nearly everything we wanted, often quite literally beyond our wildest dreams. What came with that, however, has been a myriad of unforeseen repercussions. We are caught in "too much too soon," and it's driving us crazy.

All my initial commentaries of 2022 share a common theme, and I find myself there again this week. While I am hesitant to offer advice, I will reiterate the obvious: Do whatever you can to strengthen your physical, psychological, and spiritual immune systems. Take good care of your body, get as much rest as you can, and go wherever you find shelter for your heart and clarity for your mind. Make sure your ego is in the back seat, buckled in as securely as possible, and not hysterically running amuck.

Tell the truth whenever you can. Let the people you love know that you love them. Try to be compassionate toward those you don't love. Resist your enemies and anyone who wishes you harm, but don't hate them (since that makes them stronger). Surrender, but not to the monsters or to Death Culture.

Instead, surrender to humility. Let false certainties inspired by fear fall away. Arrogance got us into this mess. Perhaps humility can help get us through it. When you feel that you know what to do, do it. When you don't know what to do or are uncertain about a choice between two directions — which may be often — refrain from action and wait patiently. Right now, with Mercury and Venus both retrograde for another two weeks, less is more.

We are on one hell of a rollercoaster ride, and there's no getting off.