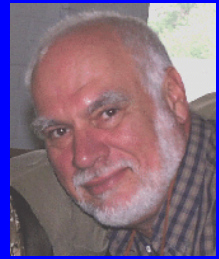


Bellicose Veins—the roots of violence in US culture

THE DARK ANGEL OF ABSTRACTION

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We USians are not noted for being intellectuals, nor do we fancy ourselves as such. To the degree that we see the intellectual as abstract from reality and impractical, we eschew the “ivory tower” for what is down-to-earth and action-oriented. When outsiders view us, they are more likely to fault us for jumping into things for short-term benefits without thinking through long term consequences.

One does not have to be a philosopher or academic, however, to be visited by the dark angel of abstraction, by the spirit that pulls us away from the full human dimensions of things and allows us to assess situations, make decisions and take action on ideas, ideals, or principles that appear innocent and well intentioned, while they wreak havoc on those about us. In “Hearts and Minds” the documentary about the Vietnam War there was an interview with a US B52 bombardier who was carpet bombing. His comment was something about the satisfaction he felt at laying down a perfect pattern from 20k feet up.

We also have a very large realm of abstraction from reality that, as USiansm we are in love with—*play*.

Power and perils of play

In the early 1940’s my cousins and I used to play soldiers. We were too young really to know much about WWII, but enough to divvy up the roles of good guys and bad guys and run around the house and the yard shooting up each other as well inflicting collateral damage on adults. At one point, our grandmother had been “shot” enough times and wanted to end the game. She went to the attic, brought down grandpa’s double barreled Browning and with mock threat said, “Now we’ll see who gets shot around here.” Needless to say, we vanished and our military maneuvers quickly disintegrated into a game of aggies. The point of this dip into personal history is that we were very clear about the difference between games and reality.

Games, I am reminded by my colleague Charles Cameron are “pocket universes.” Some purport to mirror universes we know, while others try to lead us to new worlds of fantasy. Of course we cannot escape the human dynamics involved in either kind. So in a sense, games are always a part of reality as well as mirroring some reality or other. In play, children are taught the social and physical skills they will need to grow up with. Plays and simulations guide military commanders and business people in making real world decisions.

Some years ago a friend of mine was facilitating an urban simulation that lasted several days. At one point one of the participants was so engaged and enraged that he began choking the facilitator. Only when the facilitator wheezed out a feeble “Game’s over!” did the participant come to himself and release the throat hold. Such is the power of alternative realities.

Virtual distance and virtual reality

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In recent years, a whole new world of virtual and electronic play has come into being, making the fantasy world of games ever more vivid and life-like. This seems to have two effects. The first is that it enhances the ability of play to be more real than real when one is playing it. Such gaming is obviously enormously useful but at the same time fraught with dangers. Those raised on video and computer games have a distance between what they do and the human reality of it.

Virtual communication may not seem real to people because virtual reality is somehow filtered. People can be more calculating in how they present themselves and their words, and cues and clues to a person's genuine intentions and identities that we get in real life person to person settings are often lost.

Virtual settings, particularly ones that facilitate interaction between anonymous strangers, can diminish feelings of loyalty and the obligation to feel real feelings for others. In chat rooms, we know that real people are behind the text that is typed (except for the horrid advertisements), and yet we more easily ignore, dismiss, insult, or desert them than we are likely to do in face-to-face reality.

Somehow the culture of technology blurs the relation between cause and effect. You don't really see what you are doing and you imagine and eventually believe that what comes out of the black box is what you put into it. Writing HTML is like driving stick shift, but still doesn't tell me too much more about the motor.

It's all too clean, somehow. When I was a kid the Sunday chicken dinner was still clucking when grandma brought it home from the market. What if games brought us closer to reality rather than further away, closer to people rather than farther away? How could this be?

The blame game

As to the Middle East and perhaps Korea, the US believes in guilt--somebody is to blame, find and punish the culprit. Many other peoples focus on honor and shame. This means protect those who are vulnerable or who have made mistakes. When point the finger we shame their whole family or nation, and then we wonder why they don't like us!

I would like to hear some others' thoughts on this or how our culture of games might connect us better instead of dividing us. Email me at bellicose-veins@diversophy.com.