

Ides and Go Seek

Written by Alex Baer
Saturday, 10 October 2015 23:11

'Tis the time of the wild-eyed *Bewilderbeast* which is nearly upon us, boys and girls -- thick as broomstick'd witches on candy bags, heavy as depleted uranium foil strewn on scrawny, screw-together tannenbaums.

You know where we are, calendar-wise: It's that time of the year in which Life makes even less sense than usual, in an American post-Summer simmer and in a pre-sprung Spring. Here we are, the lull between the Equinoxes -- the seasonal gap between locked and unlocked, as Vonnegut's sense of season would have it. It is neither Fall nor Winter, more Hypnotic Lockdown than anything -- making it *Hypdown* or *Locknotic*, I suppose. Up to you.

We're in the No-Sanity Zone betwixt the tart, fictional, Slack-jawed, Sourpussed War on KrissMuss and the all-too-real, tempting jar of Trick-or-Treat Sweetmeats and Jaw-breaker Bribes.

We always worry and fear the wrong things here, in this country. Halloween has us cringing at thoughts of *chain-saw killers* and *headless horsepersons* -- but, right now, and all year long, there are headless Congresspersons taking chain-saws to national life support systems, and pulling the plug on keeping infrastructure alive.

Who knows? We might even vote another 40 or 50 times to repeal a starting effort at health care for citizens, at pointless costs of hundreds of millions of dollars. We might even focus another dozen empty and vacuous hearings, and another hundred thousand pounds of baseless rage, against women's health care. Or, maybe, Poe's pale blue eye of the Tell-Tale Heart, lately of the GOP, will descend its unseeing gaze on concerns of global climate change, and House Republicans will again chase science out of its Science Committees, hoping instead to place religion in all public classrooms, and Ten Commandment monoliths in every public space larger than a two-dollar bill.

Who knows what will happen when the ice-cold violin shrieks from *Psycho* start up again as marching soundtracks for the Republican faithful?

It's a strange season, all right. All quicksand and quicksilver.

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The darkening shrouds pulled up overhead are made more ghastly and ghoulish by proximity to the real *Season of the Witch* -- the theatrical fox-and-hounds hunt, the full-throated and panicked bleating, every fourth year, by assorted sheep auditioning for the role of Presidential Wolf... or Werewolf.

(Stock up now on wolfsbane, by the way. Garlic necklaces are big this year, too, owing to the large number of unpredictable candidates, and just what might qualify as a Veep anymore...)

But, as you are already aware, we have far more *Season of the Witch-Hunt* roaming the halls of Congress than anything else now -- more timely as a *Season of the Twitch*, mixed with more bug-eyed, reason-less rhymes from an ongoing *Season of the Twits*.

(With Republicans, everything becomes one big *Season of the Glitch*, the *sons-of-uhhm*-biscuits. This is especially true when they have to drop all pretense and attempt to govern -- that thing they were so fond of saying they'd be good at, and were simply dying to get after, if only elected. Well, here we all are -- and good luck finding your way out of the cloak room, *AND* a new Speaker of the House.)

It's an odd time of year, all right. From sea to sea, stem to stern, there is a National Itch short-circuiting its way along our neural pathways like primer cord marching under the irresistible orders flared out by excitable, and very much ignitable, match-heads.

It's an itch we can never seem to quite scratch, but keeps building after Labor Day (one of many holidays named after forgotten causes, like Veterans Day, to serve the furniture liquidation and retread tire businesses).

Meanwhile: Zombies of many stripe still march around on Main Street, Wall Street, even on Easy Street and Skid Row, for the skids have been clearly greased. (The skids are always

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greased, to help make the fall of intellect and reason that much easier for gravity to snatch from our grasp, lest we climb too high toward the stars, and away from our masters.)

Let's check the zombie fashion report. Today, our zombies are wearing orange and black to highlight their own facial shades of gray. Yes, and there are sprigs of red and green popping up here and there, too, in between flutters of fall browns and reds.

The most fashionable -- and biggest -- yard-transforming holidays of the year are almost on us, packed into little more than two months. First, there's the biggest adult holiday of the year, Halloween, and then, the biggest holiday of the year for children, separated by a thin, slight lull of mumbled, inarticulate appreciation, accompanied by an empty shrug of the shoulders.

Ah, Thanksgiving: That one day a year in which unwagered gorging of flightless turkeys and wagered gouging of flying pigskins gets to compete.

It is a day in which impossible horse-hockey tales are told and retold with straight faces in school grades of single-digits, in order to cloud and sweep away any truth of the slaughter of indigenous peoples. Crepe paper pumpkins guard the kids' table, helping ease laughter into its uncomfortable berth, where plentiful innocence is corrupted and overfilled cornucopias spill.

The Day of Saying Thank You Universe For All We Have is a day jumbled in this time slot somewhere, as both rest break and intermission between book-ended MegaBashes sharing a common thread of hokey, paper-tablecloth spirituality and papier mache truth-telling. In mere moments, before the gravy dries on your chin, the starter's gun will explode with doorbuster specials on shotguns, ammo, camouflaged sweatpants, and Big Scream tepees...

... then, frontline combat shoppers will collide and fall underfoot. The blue and red swirl of lights from first responders will be added into the mix of holiday lights flashing, lost in the flashing of paparazzi bulbs, bouncing off the cycling photo-flash units of the Last Newspaper Person, arcing against the floodlights of the Action Scramble Apocalypse Tonight News Team, seeking bigger bucks via booming numbers of butts-in-seats, the counts of trampled shoppers slipping toward sidewalks in throngs, amongst a tangle of selfie sticks and self-defense batons, traded for the higher ratings of lowest common denominator mall-contact sports.

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It's 5:00 ayam, and let all Black Friday mayhem fly! □ Release the shoppers!

Yes, well: After all, we've already sang our yearly platitude about gratitude. For almost 20 or 25 whole seconds, we said thanks to Systems and Powers outside our ken and kin, in between swigs of adult entertainment beverages, while passing the potatoes and stuffing around, before launching into The Bird, and before plowing past crisped marshmallows into a deep casserole dish of sweet potato bliss... How quickly the past falls away.

Now, it's time to Launch an Offensive -- *The Battle to Go Get More Stuff Day*. It is Black Friday morning but there will be no arm bands of mourning.

The sale starts at 5:00 a.m. sharp, so get the lead out, you losers, you hear yourself say to family on T-Day Plus One.

Appreciation for all the goods already at home? That game has already been won. Now, it's time for more competing and more consuming, to help fill the hollow leg of our lives, to help give this Season a Real Reason for Grievin'. Cranberries were yesterday, today is strictly raspberries, if you don't get your butt in gear.

Turkey Day Plus One, aka Black Friday: Something to help us understand why we bother to get up in the morning and look in the mirror, even knowing that this will be *Another Day in Which We Never Ask the Pesky Questions Which Keep Crawling Up Out of the Remnants of Our Spines, Bubbling in the Backs of Our Minds...*

And then, we will all turn the second page in our yearly, two-page calendars: On one side of a page is printed July Fourth, and on the other side of that page, is the other day of the year where it's perfectly wonderful to set off explosions, too: New Year's Day...

...except that it's always the *same dang year*, over and over, without any real changes -- even small changes for a short while. We stopped hoping, see, for lasting change. That was some time ago. None of us like to think much about that.

Not around here.

* * * * *

I was in a store on Friday. The store has a name I am ashamed to name. This is because I detest giving them any more money than I must. However, thanks to their own murderous marketing, their store is *alive*, while my downtown store locations sport ghosts in its dead, vacant storefronts.

- It's the capitalist *Monster Mash*, and it caught on in a flash -- as in many small towns.

Yes: My little town has few shopping choices. And, as little as I consume, it's a spiritual wrestling match, off and on, as to which evil will win out, come shopping time -- this one rich family's chain store, or the oil people (if I want to drive a lot to go where there are other shopping choices), or the online people (who will not pay their people decently, either, or provide healthy work environments)...

So: I was trying to stubbornly remember things on a list I left in my equally-stubborn 21-year-old car out in the lot, trying to avoid going back out and fetching it, frozen in place, and staring across a shopping aisle, half mesmerized and half entranced in telepathic communication with the car seat on which the list rested, when I at last consciously focused on a small, impromptu, apparental accidental, in-store, seasonal pageant:

- *Clerks, wrestling fully-assembled fake Christmas trees -- ornaments and lights and all -- into and among Halloween displays of monster-and-princess-costumed figures and stacks of rack-and-stack cardboard boxes of chocolates, both cheap and choice.*

Amused and bemused at first, it dawned on me how incredibly appropriate these mixed dioramas and holiday tableaux were, displays evolving via store staff, seasons and reasons colliding, along with special seasonings and Reason Itself, all heaped together, with jumbled-up holiday bric-a-brac into one large grumbling rumble of goods -- a mass of consumer gristle formed and shaped into a singularly cheap, one-size-fits-all pennywhistle.

Talk about horror! The longer I stared, the more the intermingled displays made perfect sense.

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My brain was jammed into neutral, trying to process such a rich vein of visual overload. Many uncommon observations gained traction and finally found common ground after much gear-grinding and wheel-spinning, there on the slippery slopes of Mt. Flabbergasted, up by Gobsmailed Crag, where Thunderstruck Peak rests its laurels.

This was Colonel-Kurtz-level horror: Cutthroat capitalism, frenzied consumerism, mindless consumer zombies, rampant and unreasoning fears, the seeking of comfort in the arms of superstitions and traditions -- all the way to planetary death from the unsustainability of a competitive approach over all diminishing resources. It was all

smushed

together, right there:

Nightmare on Dunce Street

Night of the Living Republican. □ Dementia 365. □ Fahrenheit 666. □ Carnival of the Fox Viewers. House on Capitol Hill.

* * * * *

There was a scent of smoke and burning wire, and a flash-connected thought stung my mind: *There are too many rats in the cage. □ The symptoms of those rats are getting more acute. Then, heat-lightning memories of Zero Population Growth in the late 60s, and how it seemed so normal and natural to suggest we voluntarily limit our growth, in order to not use up everything so fast, not become those same rats in that jammed and crowded cage, fighting and fighting...*

But, that was then. There is nothing I can do now, today. There is nothing I can do with any such notions or regrets, even as their connection-by-lightning memory has been seared into the pores and alleyways of my mind, into every nook and cranny my brain can shake loose.

Hell, I'm throwing out memories here, left and right, to make room for these unexpected insights, and yet -- and yet, there is nothing I can do with them. Nothing at all. Except, maybe, share them here. Maybe you can make some sense of them.

Bees in my head, like I have said. There are days I need to take them out for a walk, and this is one of those days. I am short on leashes. The bees always come back anyway.

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So much for planning.

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I am thinking of calling this new broad-scope, clean-sweep, extended U.S. holiday season *Hallo muss*,
or, maybe,
Krissween
-- the long sleepwalk of Americana which now runs from the Ides of October to the Ides of January. I am myself partial to
Hallomuss
, I think, because it sounds like
Hollow Mess
when you say it out, lazy and tired. Which it is -- both a hollow mess, and because it also carries old, tired bones with it, scuffing its feet along, like the Statue of Liberty slopping around the house in strapless mule slippers, flapping and slapping against the great, greenish-blue patina of her coppery feet.

Of course, I am also thinking of calling this holiday period *The Season of Blight*.

I mean, don't get me wrong -- this same stretch of the calendar has always been a favorite, ever since I was a kid. It's just that I am starting to see that we need to consider language as honest markers and reminders, not just as placeholder equivalents for thinking and thoughts as cozy and reassuring as comfort food.

We are only here right now, you and I, and then we are gone again. Life is short. We do not know what is next, how much time we have until we go. We are practiced only in being alive, and without clue or hope to know what it will be like when we do not wake, for the first time, to start a new day.

- Will there be time or consciousness for anything, for regret? Opportunity to do what we first failed to do while here? Will we be aware of missing the call to begin a new day -- the very first time we have missed such a call to Life?
- I have had my attention repeatedly brought to this point: How is it, exactly, am I using my absurdly small allotment of time granted me in this life? My answers are meager, humble,

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humiliating...

The door to this room of The Great Mysteries of Life asks and opens easily, but answers and closes with great difficulty. If we truly expect to see God someday, as some profess, why are we not living as He commanded, in order to make Him happy when we show up at the gates, and help ease His judging of our lives, perhaps even make Him proud? If, however, we imagine that this Life, here and now, is all we get, then why are we not making better and wiser use of our time -- living in ways which demonstrate how rare and sacred this thing called Life really is?

Either way, and, as none of us truly knows what is next, why do we live in ways which make light of Life? We stumble and dodge and dodder around, avoiding what is truly important, making up rules for getting through it to suit ourselves, as if taking part in an unimportant, childish board game played once a year on a bet, on a lark, on a bored whim.

We play like there should always be counting involved -- lots of counting and accounting. (Please place your bets on whether or not you believe God is a CPA, keeps money ledgers, keeps score using bank accounts.)

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Not to get more oblique than usual, but there is an old sociological-psychological notion that's been grabbing at the edges of my attention for four or five decades: whether language determines thought or the other way around. It's a chicken-and-egg paradigm, and as good a conversation starter on a porch filled with summer sunshine and pitchers of lemonade -- or around a full-moon campfire with a half-full bottle of bourbon in tow -- as one might ask the Olympian gods to provide.

Do we perform ourselves any favors with our politeness factors, with our failures to speak civilly, yet plainly? Is it political or correct, our *political correctness* of language -- or neither? Is some new linguistic monstrosity chiding our manner and hiding our real thoughts, or vice versa, or both? Neither?

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Clearly, this will not settle itself right now. Right now, all I am interested in is -- *what?*

- [Long pause] *This is a very good question.*
- *I suspect this is a question worth asking ourselves DAILY.*

There is no harm, and much good, to be gained from what little joys and happiness we can eke out and coax from our daily lives. I don't want to begrudge or steal the memories of this long, loosely-hinged season...

I suppose it's the untruthfulness, the hypocrisy, the lack of fairness to ourselves, to our thinking, which always gets me a bit sideways. It's a dark season -- figuratively and literally. This year, for example, we Fall Back, as it's said, on the overnight of Halloween, and then the treadmill starts, in high gear, with merchants making a run at us, and at their year-end finishing line -- all during a cold, bleak time of year in which we try to invite in more light...

... and we hijack pagan festivals, and lift whatever we like from other cultures, and swaddle them in newly-fashioned clothes, and trim those indoor and outdoor trees -- forgetting about letting in more light, occupying ourselves with letting out more hate, more snarls from tightly-packed rats held too long in the cage. We are too crazed from poor language choices to understand who we are, why we are, where we are.

We have these seasonal traditions, these invented transitions, these odd transmissions from another world, to help us refocus.

We forget to breathe. We forget to let in more light. We lose our traction in snow, and let ourselves get towed -- not to home and hearth and safety, but towed to the Shopping Mall, to maul and be mauled.

Yes: There may still be American jobs clinging to each of us dumping holiday bucks all around. But, do we need to spend \$74 per person this year on Halloween? That's nearly seven BILLION dollars worth -- for what? More Chinese-made plastic crap for the landfill?

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Do we really want the hand-to-hand combat practice, at oh-dark-thirty on Black Friday, trying to *MAYBE*

get one of the elusive four-dollar toasters, or one of the slippery 200-buck wall teevees, out of the TWO or THREE shipped to the store, total, in order to meet advertised minimums, as a pretense to meeting advertising law -- fine print not read by the 239 people braced against the front doors in track shoes and hockey masks?

Do 21 million of us, and more, really want to play Spin-the-Pricing-Wheel guessing games with airline flights that roar past one another this holiday, allowing us miniature touch-downs here and there as microscopic islands of quality time?

Maybe this meditation on our habits is meaningless twaddle, however well-connected the dots may be, however obvious the message that we have jumped the shark, jumped all the rails, jumped the guard rails of the cliff.

- Maybe all life is simply jungle reflex, of eat-or-be-eaten.
- *Updated for the consumer society: □ consume or be consumed.*

Maybe the search for more honest living, for more conscious living, for more living in the moment, is too complex and baroque, like trying to autopsy a joke to find out its workings -- where observing the moment changes the moment. Where prying open the guts of a joke kills the joke in surgery.

- Perhaps we are meant to simply shut up and be.

I could accept that, if we weren't so smug, and so wrong, in our proclaimed American exceptionalism, while ghouls and zombies traipse among us, condemning pagan rites from which we stole so many revered traditions, while we fail to make laws, or make any sense, to ourselves, each other, our communities.

Perhaps I expect too much, expecting humans to make some sense, and to work together, for the good of the country, and not just work for the benefit of the few at its tippy-top, driving the bus, telling us to stay behind the white line, and quit trying to talk to the drivers at the wheel of government, commerce, community...

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We cradle knobby designer gourds and rest them on fall-themed harvest display shelves and sideboards. □ We slide wafer-thin magnets from truculent local businesses on our refrigerator fronts, onto the hand-made drawings of each child's hand, magically transmogrified into turkeys in profile, on paper heavily waxed in crayon, while, across the kitchen, cookies and craft projects rest on crinkled wax paper. □ Succulent, top-heavy birds self-baste and bathe in warm, enfolding ovens, trying to remember when it was, exactly, they were supposed to activate their Tender Timers...

Holiday hide-and-peek, coast to coast, ides to ides, October to January, two months stretched into three, forgetting what was sought, finding everything but what we tried most to seek.

It's the way of things now, with so many rats in the cage, all needing space and time, soul and heart, meals and mind, for *Hallomuss*. For *Krisween*.

At least, one lucky turkey gets his sentence commuted by the President each year. Would that we could all be so lucky, that we could all be such Houdini escapists, that we could all be so Zen...

...about Life. About our own chances for Parole, second chances. About our chances to activate our own *Tender Timers*, just in the nick of time.

Aye, the Ides are upon us. □ Now, go and seek.

RESOURCES:

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Season of the Witch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAzTnsSgs2s>

The Horror.... (quotes from *Apocalypse Now*): http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078788/trivia?tab=qt&ref_=tt_trv_qu

Monster Mash: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2PoSljk8cE>

The secret GOP meeting on re-energizing the party and choosing a new Speaker of the House:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qNeGSJaQ9Q>

Sapir-Whorf: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistic_relativity

Halloween spending: <https://nrf.com/resources/halloween-headquarters>

Christmas spending & holiday flights: (Please check local listings; your *smileage* may vary.)