

It's Good to Be Sane. Mostly.

Written by Alex Baer

Wednesday, 19 February 2014 21:27 - Last Updated Wednesday, 19 February 2014 22:26

Here is a question for you: Is America worth your personal investment of a couple hours and some medium-to-moderate thought? No, it's OK -- this is not a disguised recruitment tool of any kind, nor is this an attempt to sell you aluminum siding. Your long-distance carrier or digital service plan provider is not involved here, honest.

Although, to be fair, I think this is a pretty good experiment of a couple different kinds. The primary one is whether you would be willing to spend a couple hours to see if you are sane -- if you're operating on good information that makes sense to you and to some others who are accomplished in such matters.

Put it this way: I spent the two hours and I have to say, you know, that I'm relieved about a lot of things, and yet troubled about some others. Maybe I should start at the beginning.

Let's say this were possible: Out of the blue and without warning, and with no time for preparation, you are given 10 seconds to determine the kind of America you want to live in, and the kind of America that you want your friends and family to live in, too. Whatever you say goes -- it will be done.

OK, based on average reading speed in this country: Time's up. So: What kind of America do you want?

Maybe I should rephrase that: What *other* kind of country would you like to live in, if you couldn't actually have an America in which you are a more-or-less benevolent dictator, simply swimming in seaside villas and snowed-in with mountaintop chalets, awash in food and drink, and where you are all stocked up, chock-a-block, with all possible manner of vehicles, toys, gadgets, pools, masseuses, chefs, personal tasters, and a bunch of people who can hook up that really impressive, Hollywood-Bowl-sized home-theater thing you've been itching for?

With any luck, and after realizing the really good genie-in-a-bottle, avalanche-of-winning-lottery-tickets scenario isn't part of the deal, you've given this a few seconds' thought. With even more luck, the kind of America you want is one that includes some description or other of basic fairness, basic opportunity for everyone, a chance for everyone to

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succeed.

There are all kinds of ways of creating fairness, and trying to nurture it along, and see that it's possible and available. There are lots of ways of describing what that fairness might look like, feel like, and be. I'm not going to quibble with you over descriptions. I'll simply hope that fairness and opportunity were part of your off-the-cuff, off-the-top-of-your-head thinking.

What's the point of this exercise? This: Few of us think of such things. Us, choosing how the country will be? Such a thing is in the realm of available options. Each of us is only one person, after all. Nobody listens to us. And so on.

Our list of excuses is understandable. We're busy to the point of being swamped on a good day and inundated on others. We can no longer afford to be the dreamers we were when we were younger. No one will listen to me anyway -- and I've tried in the past. And so on.

Thing is: We go on Zombie Autopilot in some ways, and simply forget that we *can* choose -- that we are *a*
ble

to choose. Just like we can forget that this life, whether we enjoy the thought or not, is a pilgrimage. There is a beginning, there is an ending. We can be as aimless or as focused as we wish. We can try to make our actions part of our journeys and outcomes, or not.

It follows that we, to a greater or lesser extent, deserve what we get. Oh, I realize there are hundreds and thousands of reasons why your decisions and attempts and actions haven't produced the desired results, or have been blocked, or haven't been taken in the face of towering odds, and so forth.

All givens. Been There, Done That territory, all of us. So -- that's reason enough to stop considering our preferences? To stop speaking up and making our voices heard? To no longer attempt to counter the weight of monied interests in steering a course for our nation? Since when did we have no preference for how things are?

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Good questions. Whatever you believe about actions and activities is between you and your own conscience. I say this without any scent or whisper of *guilt-trippery* around it, honest. And, as a former Catholic, I can provide you a brief, small smile, in saying that I have spent a lifetime disassembling those personality components. It's a work in process, though.

But, if the question were smaller in scope -- *whaddya watch on TeeBee tah-night, or whaddya want for dinner?*

-- I suspect you wouldn't be willing to let it slide, that you'd have some ideas for input, and want to give them.

Better yet: I suspect you could even explain why you made the suggestions you did -- that you were aware of what was at stake, aware of your desires, aware of the choices available, and determined that you wanted your choice or choices heard. So, you spoke up.

This is what is technically known in scientific communities as a *no-brainer*. And: So much for attempted levity.

The thing is: Considering choices is like dipping into a bowl of free peanuts set up along the bar. Once you start considering questions, it's difficult to stop at just one. Before long, you've built up a sort of chain-reaction of questions, each answer driving a new question.

Oh, sure -- you can avoid the bowl of peanuts easily enough. Most of us do. Plus, no one can live on a diet of the things. Not even by trying to keep up with that salted thirst with really great-tasting craft-brewed beers that are, for all the world, *a genuine loaf of bread in every bottle*.

Too many peanuts, after all, builds a powerful thirst. There's an analogy hiding in here somewhere, but I've managed to ramble long enough that I've ambled off to the side, over here. Hang on a sec while I find my way and hike back.

OK, good. ☐ Thanks.

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Before you ever consider what your action, or your inaction, is going to be in any one area -- or if total ignorance and apathy is the way to go -- you had to have first had some inkling of what was going on around you. Understanding the options for supper, say, gives the wheels of choice a little grease. A great number of us haven't a clue what's in the cupboard, 'fridge, or if take-out's available.

It's good to know if something is a problem, if it isn't working right or well or correctly. It's good to know the problem before striking out in the direction of a solution. And, it's good to know what the possible choices are -- what constitutes working well, or poorly, or whatever.

So, then, here's where's I get stuck: Why do so many of us have no clear understanding of the problems facing our country? Why do so many of us fail to express the kind of country we want? Are we so busy we're happy to leave our thinking, and our choices, to others? Are we so busy that we're willing to accept the reality created by the people in media who make fortunes by capitalizing on our ignorance and our fear? Do we know we're trading our future to such people with our disinterest? Are we so easily buffaloed and shanghied?

* * * * *

There's a lot of money to made in diverting any clear understanding of what's going on. There's a lot of powerful forces working to suppress understanding, and to suppress people from really knowing what they want, and knowing what their choices are. There is much money and power to be gained from keeping people as dumb and silent as possible.

You can pit one camp against another, and let the worst aspects of human nature run riot, silencing the crowd by putting everyone at each other's necks. You can shut down voices by creating cynicism and apathy. You can confuse choices by scapegoating some people and clouding ideas about what is really going on, supplanting facts with opinion and propaganda.

That's what we have today, in a nutshell. We've all helped ourselves from the bowl of free peanuts. We've mostly gone the course of least resistance, allowed the choices to be obscured, gone along with not speaking out -- or speaking up. For the most part, we've been

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lulled into thinking we need not get involved. And, you know, we tell ourselves, things aren't *that* bad yet...

And on and on and on.

The problems seem daunting. The answers seem unknowable. The choices seem unimaginable. And that's exactly the way an awful lot of people and businesses and politicians and media stars and civic leaders and popular role models and your neighbors, and mine, sure seem to want it.

Why not? When you've got it made, why change? When you're riding the Gravy Train Express, who would ever willingly hop off, tumbling into the ditch?

Back to human nature.

* * * * *

Well, whatever you decide to do or not do -- or just walk away from the discussion altogether -- maybe it would be helpful to at least know what was going on. Doesn't mean you'd be obliged to actually *DO* anything, mind you. But, it might be good to get some idea of what was happening, if only to not be fooled by all the people making money out of keeping visibility near zero by simply never allowing the dust to settle, and by keeping *their* sleight of hand faster than *your* misdirected eye.

Toward that end, I am ready to go out on a limb and say that Globalization and Technology are responsible for most of country's woes -- not because they exist, but because our decisions have not kept pace with them.

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It's not much of a limb. It's a sturdy trunk of an oak, in fact, just turned sideways, sort of, by my own sleight of hand.

See, my limb is from Robert Reich, former U.S. Secretary of Labor. In wandering around on the internet, it's still possible to fall over some actual answers, among all the smoke and mirrors and porn and constant pounding of 12-pound, commercially-swung messaging-hammers landing bows on your forehead at every single step.

My epiphany of the moment is knowing that I am not, in fact, insane, and that my mind still works reasonably well. Either that, or Robert Reich and I are crazier than hoot owls on white lightning at full moon.

If the latter turns out to be true, that he and I are in the same boat, and just plain nuts, I can only say that I have an excellent boat-mate, and that I look forward to moving the canoe back upstream, along the riverbank, in search of whatever paddles we might still need.

Even better, I was able to come to this very clear, simple conclusion almost immediately. It did not require years of therapy or indoctrination. It required about 25 or 30 minutes, and a little common sense. However, I took the entire 2-hour ride simply because it was a lot of fun.

I realize in hindsight it was a good investment in America. I actually enjoyed realizing something I had long suspected: that the nation's problems had relatively easy-to-identify core hiccups and symptoms. It was good to have it proven so well and so clearly.

I also enjoyed the invigorating, minute-to-minute realization and reinforcement of the idea that I was still sane, that my mind was still functioning reasonably well, and that I had not hallucinated previously supposed causes of those problems, nor was I psychotic in proposing, in my own mind, what a few good fixes might be about.

After endless exposure these days to misinformation, to scapegoating, to obfuscation, to propaganda, to a total lack of facts, it's easy to suspect that creeping insanity is having its way with your brain stem, and in more or less the same fashion as an excitable dog upon meeting

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your leg.

In a Twainish way, I am pleased to report to you that the reports of my insanity have been greatly exaggerated. (However, I also realize it is sometimes good, and to your benefit, to keep 'em guessing.)

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The causes of the country's problems are straightforward and the fixes are equally straightforward. They are both easy to understand. Just about anyone can understand them, if the facts are presented well and there is some attempt made to understand them. Whether or not we will decide to do anything is another thing altogether.

Once the problems are known, the first third of the battle, I think, is over. The remaining two-thirds of it is the heavy lifting, and the main part of the battle. The main part of the battle requires us to all get off the couch once in a while. The main part of the battle requires us to stop listening to the people who have a stake in clouding the issues, keeping the status quo, and making a killing on the way things are set up now.

Yeah: Once you know the problem, things clear up considerably. Then, it's a matter of what to do next. And, the what-to-do-next requires uncomfortable things, like explaining things to others. Like getting involved a little bit every once in a while. Like not expecting the great experiment called America to run on autopilot while we all go play.

Like getting people to Turn Off Fact-Fearful Fox and to ignore media millionaires who have made their fortunes just by preying on human fear. It will also involve asking people, nicely, where their facts and beliefs come from, and explaining where yours originate -- and why it is that yours claim a higher ground of common-sense sensibility, and helping them see that, too, if you can.

I have no idea if enough of us will try to wipe our slates clean, give the information a fair hearing, try to understand it, and test if it seems to make sense to us. I also have no idea if we

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will decide to do anything with the information once it's inside our minds. There's no way of telling, I imagine.

However, whatever faith I am able to muster in humanity's and in America's regard continues to be in one place: in the historical cycles of history. Seeing the present clearly, in between squinting at the future, is a trick that is scary at first, but comforting in the long run.

And, Calamity, unless complete, has no choice but to give way to repairs. It's what we restless beings do -- dream, tinker, repair. So far, Calamity has only dabbled with us in dribbles. I hope all our whimsical, loose-flywheel ways are up to the challenge when Calamity doubles down and really gets serious.

History says we're due.

The 2-hour ride is contained in two links, noted below. □ I think it is helpful to watch them in order.

Reich at UC Berkeley: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCu-XnVxhfk>

Reich on Moyer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-rpkZe2OEo>

Today's Bonus:

Which is the greater achievement, or the greater sin -- obscuring and twisting facts to further a political agenda, or teasing the existing facts to educate and produce ironic laughter? Bill and Jon both make money in the same arena, just doing different things. Have fun while deciding which one is doing which: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQYNQuPVErg>

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(Your answer, by the way, will also sum up how well that 2-hour ride went for you.)