Human Fallibility

by Bill Herbst

Humans are fallible — all of us: The "good" ones, the "bad" ones; the smart ones, the stupid ones; the rich, the poor; the leaders, the followers: the men, the women; the parents, the children; the authoritative, the servile; those who seem sane, those who seem crazy; those who are sure they know, those who are clueless. Every single one of us is fallible, given to at least some fictions and fantasies that don't gibe with reality.

Of course, the extent of our fallibility varies widely, as do the consequences of our condition. People exist in the world who are so full of crap that we would be well-advised not to believe anything they say. There are also people who are more trustworthy within certain limits. I'm not saying that we should always believe even these people, since uncritical acceptance of any presumed truth is an abdication of personal responsibility, but we would be wise to consider what they tell us as possibly accurate and true.

Distinguishing where, when, and how we humans are right about almost anything from where, when, and how we are wrong is a task of daunting complexity, whether we are attempting to assess that from outside, about other people, or looking inward at ourselves. We are a species that is downright brilliant at rationalizing even our deepest delusions. In part, this is because our intellects are invariably the servants of our emotions and beliefs. It doesn't matter much (and maybe not at all) if those emotions and beliefs are reasonable and substantiated or completely cuckoo, just made up out of some compendium of imagined experience — hopes, wishes, dreams, desires, needs, fears, whatever. Our big brains are overwhelming and get us into all sorts of trouble.

Sometimes we suffer from failures of character. We can be devious and cunning in attempting to fool others or ourselves. In that mode, we lie on purpose, often with bad intent. Whatever we think we have to lose or gain is more compelling for us than telling the truth. After all, we are social creatures, and our self-esteem is powerfully connected to how others regard us. And so we lie, even when we know we're lying. Approval gives us an advantage, and even the most courageous and conscientious among us are hard-pressed to relinquish that leverage. We hide, obfuscate, and confuse to maintain or enhance our social status. In the extreme, this is sociopathic or psychopathic, but it occurs to a lesser degree for all of us, and probably more often than we'd like to admit.

Other times (and quite frequently) we tell other people something that may be true for us, but isn't true for them. We're not lying or trying to deceive, but — even with the best intentions and most loving motives — that's what we end up doing. We think we have the capital-T Truth, but it's only small-t truth — true for some people sometimes, but not true for everyone all the time. As a result, we misinform others and lead them astray with our false certainty. This can apply to overt advice, which may be dead wrong, but it also applies to simple self-expression, which then might be interpreted by others as advice, and thus carry potentially harmful effects.

The whole issue of authority is deeply woven into our fallibility. Confidence and certainty are very compelling for human beings, especially in performance. Someone who acts confidently and appears certain is more likely to be believed. We often mistake certainty for strength of character and clear insight, even when it might just as likely be a cover for weakness or insecurity.

Among the many breakdowns that are occurring in America as the Empire comes apart at the seams, one that is particularly significant and serious is that faith and trust in traditional authority have eroded. Although faith and trust in authority routinely wax and wane from one period in history to the next, we are witnessing something fundamentally different now. Our institutions have failed us, our authorities have proven untrustworthy, and our cohesion as a culture is disintegrating.

This is not to suggest that our institutions and the authorities who managed them always served us well in the past. That's ridiculous. Americans have been played for fools time and again by corrupt authorities of every stripe. Nor does our mistrust imply that Americans have given up on authority altogether. Not even close. However paradoxical it may seem, we are as slavish to authority as ever. What's happened is that we've splintered into various camps that are implacably pitted against other camps. Each camp has its own authorities — believing one set of authorities means that we don't believe others and actively deny any opposing views. Disagreement has devolved into hatred.

Before I go too far down the rabbit hole with all this, let me cut to the chase. Where I want to take this discussion might be a little different than where it may seem I'm headed.

What I'm chewing on these days is the notion that, given the overwhelming evidence of human fallibility, the screwed-up world we've created in modern civilization might be (and I emphasize "might be") about as good as we can make it. I know that's disappointing to read, but what if it's true? Perhaps any species that's both as clever and as full of crap as ours is simply can't be expected to create loving, harmonious, and compassionate systems of living together on this garden planet.

I'm examining in myself the possibility that I've got it wrong. Maybe I expect way, way too much from all of us. I've alluded to this in past commentaries, and I periodically return to re-consider that possibility. If it's true, then the massive amounts of cruelty and suffering in the world are pretty much the expected baseline. I'm not happy about that, but it would be in line with my understanding of the fundamental precepts of both Buddhism (that life inevitably involves suffering) and Christianity (that we are all sinners in need of redemption). Both religions offer their respective solutions for getting past our inherent condition. I have to admit that I'm drawn much more to Buddhism's long-term disciplines of non-attachment than I am to Christianity's relatively instantaneous redemption through acceptance of a Savior. After 72 years, though, I'm still struggling, and I don't feel that I've made much progress.

Maybe every moment of grace is indeed "miraculous." Perhaps I should start celebrating more consciously and emphatically each small act of kindness that occurs as extraordinary and wonderful. Maybe joy is like the bloom of a flower — an event of exquisite and exotic beauty that lights up the world but passes all too quickly because it is so rare and special.

Even if I were to decide that this perspective is correct and worthwhile as a way of transcending the horror and madness of the modern world, I'm not at all sure that I could make the transition to effectively take comfort in the tiniest goodness, however ephemeral and passing it may seem.

Still, it's on my mind. There aren't too many rides at the carnival that interest me anymore. I've been on a lot of them and had my share of excitement and fun, but now that I'm coming down the homestretch, the rides themselves are not nearly as compelling as they once were. The larger questions around joy and suffering remain, though, and take center stage.

All right. Now that I've waltzed down the road to an apparent conclusion, allow me one final plot twist before the end credits roll. My best answer to the question, *"What if I'm wrong?"* is that I'm not wrong. In spite of our fallibility, human beings can do better than the horror of the modern world (which includes far too many toxic elements we take for granted and may even consider "good"). Not only can we do better, but we should. Not only should we, but we must. The fact that we aren't even making headway in that direction shows how far wrong we've gone in allowing the monsters to rule and Death Culture to spread.

For those of us who still posses some semblance of sanity, despite our fallibility, our job is to survive until the whole rotten edifice collapses. If enough of us are able to stick around and pick up the pieces, we might be able to start again.