

# Control

by Bill Herbst

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*[Preface: Sharp-eyed readers may note that this week's commentary ("Control") bears more than a passing resemblance in tone and content to last week's commentary ("Castles in the Sky"). That's because this blog is less a discrete series of short articles about the ongoing drama of the outer world than a kind of public diary of my personal thoughts and concerns, the stuff I'm trying to get my head around to make sense of a world gone mad. In other words, please understand that I'm a work in progress, and so are these commentaries. Anyway, on with the show...]*

Among the many illusions that human beings like is the idea that someone is in control. That "someone" does not have to be ourselves and often isn't. That's OK, because it harkens back to infancy and childhood, when "big people" controlled everything, and we didn't have to. For some of us, the "someone" who's in control is a mystical being we call God. In many religions — not all, but most — God is the creator of the Universe. God is both in charge and in control. God can be trusted. God loves us. For other people, the "someone" in control is a human being other than ourselves — sometimes singular, as in one person, but more frequently plural, as in many other people.

I'm calling the belief that someone is in charge an "illusion" not because I know that for sure — I don't — but because the idea itself cannot be proven. Maybe it's true and maybe it's not, but we'll never know with any certainty. Rather, this is the way we're programmed to need or want reality to be. In the tricky arena of human nature, the idea of control seems to be built in. Reality does not cause itself. Some agency — someone or something — causes it to be as it is.

The implementation of causality may be simple or complex. Agency can be as straightforward as "*Ooga Booga, Presto!*" — pure magic, like the flying carpets in the Arabian Nights or the superpowers of Marvel Comics characters. Or it may be as complicated as science, technology, and industry, where the creation, construction, and production of a smart phone or a skyscraper or a particle accelerator is a vast project involving the sustained and coordinated efforts of thousands or even millions of people, all of whom stand on the shoulders of past achievements by millions of others, and usually under the guiding vision of a smaller cadre of powerful leaders who know how to harness and organize all the resources required. You know, *business people*, whether their business is commodities, security, government, whatever. Such people, who are sometimes presumed to comprise membership in various secret societies — Freemasons, Illuminati, Bilderberg, or Davos — are seen by others and often by themselves as Masters of the Universe. They may not have created the earth in any original

sense, but they have plumbed and extracted the resources of the planet to create the world of modern civilization, whether we like that world or not.

Our need to believe in this illusion — that someone is in control — is so deep-seated and powerful that it might as well be absolute among humans. It's not, of course, but it's probably close. Although philosophies exist that hold that no one is in control, that reality is chaotic and random in ways that are either literally true or transcend our understanding, not many people embrace that perspective. As a reason for reality being the way it is, random chaos is little more than an intellectual exercise that tends not to sink in very far. When push comes to shove, however, humans tend to revert back to the idea that someone, somewhere, somehow is in control and is causing what's happening or caused what already happened. The old phrase, "*There are no atheists in foxholes*" leans hard in that direction, although I'm pretty sure that there are, in fact, atheists in foxholes, since God is not the only alternative to random chaos.

One reason that God's being in control is preferable to other humans being in control is that when things go wrong and manifest in ways we don't like, it's hard to blame a deity. "*God works in mysterious ways*" or "*God has a Plan*" tends to undercut finger-pointing. OK, I didn't like it that my kid got sick or that I was fired from my job or that sex was never as good as it was supposed to be, but I can't blame God for any of that. Whether or not God actually caused whatever lousy thing happened is a dicey proposition at best. Perhaps it was an unfortunate by-product of some other essential goodness in the larger "plan."

On the other hand, if human beings are in control, then all bets are off about suspending blame. If other human beings caused whatever I didn't like (or at least had a hand in that), then they are to blame and should be held accountable.

We seem to have reached a point in America where damn near everything is open to the accusation of blame. Somebody else is the source of our unhappiness, discontent, or suffering. And those culprits need to be defeated, suppressed, or even killed.

Not too long ago I watched a YouTube video from a left-wing political channel that was criticizing Ben Shapiro, a popular right-wing pundit. The video showed clips of a presentation Shapiro gave where he was fielding questions from the audience. One guy asked him, "*When do we get to start killing liberals?*" Shapiro swallowed hard and tried to dissuade the questioner from that course of action, which pretty much fell on deaf ears. This guy, and probably some others in the audience, seemed deadly serious about killing liberals. They have their AR-15s and AK-47s oiled, ready, and loaded for bear. All they need is permission to start hunting down and taking out those Commie-Socialist bastards.

Flip that 180°, and we get "liberals" and "progressives" who think that the entire right side of the political/cultural spectrum is comprised of "whacko nut-jobs." But then, every group identifies some other group to blame, even if the finger is pointed at a straw man. The vaccine mandate folks tend to lump together

anyone who has any hesitation about COVID vaccines under the labels of anti-vaxxer or freedom-obsessed libertarian.

The upshot is that many of us seem to believe that it's somebody else's fault that things are so fucked up, and if only *they'd* change, life would get better. Yeah, well, maybe not. Perhaps no one is to blame, not even God. Wouldn't that be a pisser, that maybe our vengeance-seeking is misinformed.

When I posit that no one may be to blame, I don't mean to imply that no one is crazy. Hell, people are as crazy as the day is long. Nor am I suggesting that people are not responsible for the results of what they do or cause to be done because of their crazy beliefs. No, people *are* responsible. What I'm saying is that our hating them for their craziness and wishing for them to be punished or otherwise made to suffer is, quite probably, ineffective and wrong-headed.

The radical idea I'm chewing on here is not my invention. I didn't think it up. It's a longstanding tenet of many religions for as far back as we choose to go. In Christianity, it boils down to "*Love thine enemies,*" and "*Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.*"

The basic idea is that bringing people back into the fold of sanity from the disturbed alienation of madness is best achieved by loving them back to health. Even further and more radically, the implication is that loving them may be the *only* way to achieve that. For most people most of the time, that's a bridge too far. That level of apparent forgiveness to presumed sins is just too much to ask of fallible human beings who are, at the end of the day, hell-bent on controlling others to achieve if not agreement at least compliance with the accepted narrative "truths," and to do so by force if necessary.

I'm not at all sure about walking the tightrope between forgiveness and accountability without falling to one side or the other. I believe that both are valid and necessary, yet they seem if not mutually exclusive, at least seriously contradictory.

The end of the American Civil War in 1865 presented a similar dilemma: forgive or punish? Lincoln wanted reconstruction to be based in forgiveness, but his assassination put an end to that. We never found out if forgiveness might work, and the result was 100 more years of Jim Crow. Yes, we abolished slavery, but we didn't get rid of hatred, weirdness, and the suffering that accompanied them.

Now we're approaching another crossroads, one that includes the issue of racism, but goes all the way to questions about the future of civilization and our very survival as a species. We don't seem to be close to solving any of the looming dilemmas and worsening crises we face, and it looks like things will probably get a whole lot worse before they even have a chance to get better.

Apparently the time for answers has not yet arrived.