

Game Over

by Bill Herbst

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Nearly two years ago, in August of 2020, I penned and posted a commentary titled, "The Powell Memo." For anyone interested, the essay is archived on the Essays page of my web site. That was during the first wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic, which — over the next two years — so effectively ripped off the mask of American hypocrisy, corruption, and greed. I don't wish to wax metaphysical about how a tiny virus was enlisted to pull on the thread that unraveled America, but it did so in a manner that no previous event had achieved — not the neoliberal nonsense of the Reagan Presidency; not the first Gulf War; not Bill Clinton's Nafta, mass incarceration, and financial deregulation outrages; not 9-11 and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; not the 2008 financial meltdown and the cringe worthy big bank bailouts that followed; nor any of the other various socio-political scandals that ensued, becoming so routine that they went almost unnoticed as lethal insults to American sanity. We've been through the death of a thousand cuts.

Last week's leaked release of the Supreme Court's intention to overturn *Roe v. Wade* shocked many liberal Americans, but it shouldn't have. Ending women's control over their bodies and re-criminalizing abortion have been in the works for many decades now, and their passage into law is, if not quite yet a fait accompli, probably imminent.

Where we are is the equivalent of a Little League baseball game where one team is so far ahead by the fifth inning that the game might as well be called to spare any further humiliation for the team getting the stuffing beaten out of it. I'd offer that the score in the game for America's soul is roughly *Monsters 26, Humans 3*. Basically, it's all over but the shouting and celebration of the winners.

The reason I reference the Powell Memo is that it represents a sort of gauntlet thrown down that marked the beginning of the current struggle for America's soul, a game that's been contested, hotly and full-tilt, for the past 50 years. And while the game may continue, at least for awhile, the outcome is no longer in doubt. The monsters have won. They now own and run America.

I have watched over my lifetime as the monsters have deftly taken advantage of every disaster — whether created intentionally by the club of monsters or as simply an unexpected and unhappy occurrence sparked by fate, chance, or

whatever. Each further outrage and insult has resulted in the monsters becoming the lucky beneficiaries as they profited handsomely from the upwelling of human suffering and the draconian “security” measures they lobbied for. Once in place these policies are never rescinded after the crisis subsides. One by one, the progressive, humane, and hard-won gains of the previous century have been undone, overturned, and lost, with each defeat representing another nail in the coffin of any possible sane collective future for America, civilization, and humanity. Each additional step takes us further down the road to hell on earth.

I ask myself why the monsters do this. Do they not realize that no one is ultimately exempt from the hell they’re creating? No, they obviously don’t realize it. Maybe they’ve considered that and rejected it as bogus. I surmise that they believe their wealth and power will enable them to protect themselves and their families. And who knows? Maybe they’re right in the short run, for awhile, perhaps a century or so, but what then? Once the demonic genie is truly unleashed from the bottle (in the historically probable forms of poisoned habitats, climate disruption, and/or nuclear war), then everybody is toast.

The artificial biospheres so popular in science fiction are the fictional equivalent of the fallout shelters Americans built in their basements and back yards during the atomic bomb scares of the Cold War 1950s. Despite massive underground caverns and South Sea islands and rockets to Mars, my guess is that all these survivalist measures for the rich and powerful will be useless ultimately, nothing more than sad monuments to human folly. Nonetheless, it appears to me that the monsters are aware of what they’re doing. So, they must feel they’re exempt and immune from the harm they do.

Geez, it’s bad enough that some human beings participate in the virtue-signaling of *“See how great I am in doing good for the world!”* That level of social hubris is embarrassing. The opposite — where people revel arrogantly in wielding power to do harm — may be nothing more than the mirror image of the child’s *“Look, Ma, no hands!”* display as an appeal for praise and acceptance. I admit, though, that it seems much more perverse to me.

I don’t know anyone who doesn’t have a shadow side — a “back” to his or her “front” — so, any of us can, on occasion, temporarily act out as assholes or even monsters. Everyone has feet of clay. But succumbing to those demonic impulses for a moment or an hour or a day is very different from cultivating them over an entire lifetime of what amounts to criminal behavior with bad intent.

I try to imagine some reason that a person might feel justified or even righteous in becoming an asshole or a monster, and all I can come up with as motivation is *vengeance*. Perhaps these people feel so harmed, victimized, belittled, or humiliated by others or by life itself that becoming a monster is the only way they know to even the score and get revenge. I’m not suggesting that this is so — my imagination may be too limited to see other, more nuanced possibilities.

It's just that my understanding of humanity has been shaped by learning about the amygdala as a physical structure in the midbrain and the moral psychology of "us-versus-them." Together, those two factors — one physical and one philosophical/psychological — combine to make me think that vengeance reigns supreme in human affairs. I'd like to believe that the kindness, gentleness, and compassion of love are deep, potent, and profound motivations in our experience — and it seems obvious to me that they are. Held up against the raw and primal wounds of grievance and the enduring desire for revenge, however, I fear that love comes up a bit short.

Monsters would tell me that I'm wrong about this, of course. They would assert that they feel and give love in ample measure — love for their families, their friends, even their pets (maybe especially their pets...). And they would be technically correct. But that's just the Us-versus-Them dynamic at work. In balance, their impact on the world is anything but loving.

The upshot here is that I don't have any wisdom, optimism, or inspiration to impart. I might say to myself, "*Then why am I writing at all, if I don't have anything positive to offer?*" My response is that there's value to sharing our predicaments, to discover that others are struggling with the same or at least similar stuff that I am, and that we are not completely isolated and alone with our thoughts and feelings.

Right now, that's all I've got to give, and it has to be enough.