

Musings on Planned Obsolescence

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In the Christmas season of low light and “hibernating” nature, we seek many ways to affirm the persistence of light and life. We do this with frequent social and communal gatherings, by surrounding ourselves with the symbols and bright colors and lights of life, by gastronomic and material events of excessive intake and gifting, and through the beliefs and rituals of our religions, which proclaim eternal life.

Of course, for many modern people in developed countries with their work and home environments defined by 24/7 air conditioning and constant artificial light, the sense of the dark and cold of the winter season together with the long tradition associating it with decay and death may seem remote. And certainly these modern humans are not familiar with the lives of their ancestors who lived in tribes in the temperate zone over many thousands of years when the traditions and rituals surrounding the winter solstice came into being and flourished. Moderns have not experienced either starvation when winter stores ran out, rotted, or were raided by animals or other humans or death from disease that arose and spread rather rapidly when during the winter months most human groups gathered together in close quarters. For most humans, over 99% of their history, the time of low light and cold was a time of significant uncertainty and risk, and the rituals of the solstice period arose to symbolically confirm life in the face of the threat of death. In this regard, in the fourth century, the Roman Christians set the birth of Jesus to correspond to the winter solstice as calculated in the Julian calendar – December 25 – providing a Christian overlay for important solar based “pagan” rituals, in particular the Roman Saturnalia [the birth of Jesus being interpreted as the bringing of light and life and salvation into a dark and decadent world].

Most modern, temperate zone humans live in the much more secure living conditions afforded by our civilizations and do not experience the risks and threats of winter as our ancestors did [though deaths due to heart attacks and the association of flu with pneumonia among the old continue to cluster in the winter months]. As such there has been a weakening of the connection for modern humans of the winter solstice with the threat of death and dying and a tendency to view the Christmas/New Year rituals surrounding the solstice as simply a time for celebrating light and life at the secular, social level and the birth of Jesus, or Mohammed, or some other death defying figure at the religious level.

While the explicit tie of our Christmas/New Year solstice celebration to the underlying death and dying motive has been weakened in modern times, I suggest that it remains looming in the unstated background. Instead of this issue being focused on and dealt with at a traditional cyclical point in the year, it can be argued that concern with death and dying has remained at least as important as it ever was and that in its prominence in the products of our media it is now a concern that pervades the entire year. The information media's continuous and ever more visually graphic offerings highlight on a worldwide basis every major death threat, first from natural disasters [flood, fire, draught, earthquake, volcanic eruption, hurricane, tornado, epidemic, etc.], and second from the most depraved and violent of human actions [genocide, war, murder, torture, rape, robbery, kidnapping, etc.]. In addition, so much of our major media based entertainments – especially film, television and computer games, all with their extraordinary special effects – are consumed with portraying the events of everyday life as infused with danger, horror, terror, crime, violence, fear and death and with the need to confront and overcome the forces of darkness and evil and the shadowy events of the night with the most violent responses. It seems very likely that this constant barrage of media based information and entertainment with violence, death, and human degradation as its core elements is at least partly responsible for infusing modern life with such an undercurrent of anxiety that people are inclined to adopt an ever more protective/defensive approach to the world around them. This is most clear in the much more cautious stance modern parents are taking with their children – not allowing them to play and roam freely as was the case up until the 1960's when media began its real take over. And all of this is occurring in spite of the fact that modern life at the local level and in most places is in reality ever less risky and more secure. A significant overall effect of our media has been to transform this real security into a pervasive sense of uncertainty and insecurity – and to highlight the death and dying theme 24/7.

So, regardless of our seeming effort to avoid the death and dying theme in our winter solstice rituals at Christmas/New Year, the issue remains and may even have gained as a concern in our modern lives. As such, I suggest that the holiday winter solstice season remains an appropriate time to reflect on the primal underlying issue – the fact of decay and death for all things – from rocks to whales to solar systems and galaxies.

As I stir in my senior years, I am more and more impressed with the significance of the phrase “Planned Obsolescence.” I think of this phrase as applying in the domain of durable goods, but as I age, I find it encompassing more and more of my surroundings and, uninvited, intruding into my person. It seems that my

genes program me [and all others] for my own deterioration and demise – to assure that the species will be “refreshed” on a regular schedule. This, just in case there is a change in external conditions that some new genetic mix can better accommodate – “guaranteeing” continued survival of the species through evolution. All well and good for the species, but at the personal level the results are more and more ominous as the years pile up. This “demising” process can be nasty. Of course it can occur all at once; bang you are gone. That is not nasty; that is just IT. I came close to that version of demise with my major heart attack in 2003 – revived trice over with those explosive paddles, “Clear!”

Having emerged from “Clear,” now I am on the alternative course, the gradual accumulation of irritating chronic “conditions.” This year of 2008 brings on first continued hearing loss with its solution – dual “aids,” then sleep apnea together with its “answer” – the air compressor and mask to beat up my face and otherwise “enrich” the quality of my nighttime experience, and finally erectile dysfunction with its concomitant search for the magic drug to straighten me out – just wait an hour or so. Yes, I want to be alive, and yes, the ever-enlarging bundle of these chronic irritations has so far not slowed me down much, but it is the direction the bundle is going that is “troubling.” It is one thing to be aware of my “theoretical” participation in our genetic “planned obsolescence,” but it quite a different thing to experience it personally in dribs and drabs. All of which brings me to the following expanded musing.

I can observe, along with many others before me, that my Consciousness is ageless – existing without reference to any timeline. Timeless as it is, my Consciousness is the source for my continuing to see myself in terms of my physical appearance and capabilities when I was much younger and in my physical prime – still climbing and swinging from trees and having to add a meal to my diet to barely retain my slim condition. In this regard, my Consciousness of myself is always surprised by any signs of my depleted stamina or what that god-awful mirror reveals. By contrast, my Memory contains all the good and bad experiences of my entire lifetime carefully ordered in Time. It is grounded in the specifics of the reality of where I have been and where I am now. My Consciousness extracts only the value of this experience and distills it as an abstracted collective without reference to time – always just presentistic. Because of its timelessness, my Consciousness may be cumulatively wise in general but entertains expectations of me that do not match with the limitations imposed by my current reality. On the other hand my Memory is bound tightly to my experience and is so tied down to a timed reality that when I am tracking on its course, I bounce up and down from joy to despair as current conditions dictate. My Memory may be accurate, but it is rarely wise. My Consciousness may be wise, but is unconcerned by reality checks or the challenging questions

my Memory suggests in my final DEMISE. All of this is without considering the complication that arises from the input of my Conscience, which writes the superscript of feeling tone and judgment over my Memory. My Conscience is the outside moderator that comments on the content of my Memory and whose assessments infuse it with positive or negative feelings.

So, what does all this have to do with “demising?” My Consciousness does not attend to demising because the perception of demising is time-bound, and beyond the fact alone does not contribute to my presentistic collective wisdom. But my Memory accurately records in detail this demising process while my Conscience usually charges it with the negative emotions of anger and fear and judges it as more and more disappointing. Paradoxically, if I were not conscious of my demising, my Conscience could not do its dirty work and leave me in despair over the memory of the clear direction of the process.

So, what do I DO? “Ah, there’s the rub!!” I want an answer to where this disappointing demising that Memory brings to me ultimately leads me. And as the chronic bundle of the gradual demising process becomes more emphatic with age, I am more and more keen for this answer. There are but two answers as I see it, neither very satisfactory. The existential answer, which allows my reality based Memory to take the lead, is, “That’s all there is Boy; What you See is what you Get. Demise is just the prelude to, ‘YOU DEAD and GONE.’ So, seek the greatest quality you can out of the life that is granted to you, and then take your Lumps.” The other answer proceeds from my Consciousness and is the spiritual answer. It says, “Your Consciousness is not bound by time and physical existence and so, survives death and may even recycle to be housed in other forms in and of the universe. So, seek the greatest quality you can out of the life that is granted to you – so you can dissolve into the ether of the ever reformulating ALL.

A subset of the spiritual answer drawn from my Consciousness is the Religious answer. It transforms timeless Consciousness into some version of the surviving, eternal Soul. In this frame I have a terrific set of choices: I can continue as an obnoxious, interfering ancestor periodically demanding to either to have my bones cleaned or be served with ritual food fragrances; I can return as a mole and repeat this return cycle as more or less elevated entities until I “get it right” at which point I can finally enter Nirvana as one of the enlightened; or I can proceed to the waiting room of all waiting rooms, waiting to be judged, based – in one case – on a set of rules from a fickle “Almighty” God passed to Mankind on a mountain top in a lightening storm.

Now, there are a couple of really special privileges if I commit to many of these religious answers. First, I may live a life of total degradation, depravity and debauchery, but if I repent at the last moment and BELIEVE strongly enough, I can see the judgment scales ascend and have my reward in an eternal afterlife of milk and honey, 99 virgins, or streets paved with gold – my choice. And, better yet, as an enthusiast for this religious answer, during my life I can, in the name of my god and his/her “holy” strictures: torture, enslave, or kill all those humans who do not believe exactly as I do and who therefore cannot possibly qualify for everlasting bliss [unless they have been baptized post-mortem by an authorized Mormon].

So, as it turns out, I must either dwell in the zone of perpetual uncertainty suggested by my realistic Memory, or choose one of the above alternatives within the Consciousness option. I admit it; at this point I am on the fence: there are two possibilities that appeal to me: the ever reformulating ether, or the much simpler – and much more likely – DEAD and GONE option. Neither of these choices require me to worry about the mole return, getting in that last minute absolution, or answering why I have failed to commit to crusade or jihad. And neither of these choices necessitates my answering why my god waited 14 billion years before HE/SHE was interested enough in his/her creation to send an emissary to the tiny planet Earth to offer the option of everlasting life to an exclusive group of humans. Or why my god keeps a constant tally on every little action I take while being so nonchalant about assigning strictures and souls and judgment and salvation options to ants and algae and snow flakes on Earth, much less to the structures and likely life forms of the billions of other star systems of the universe.

Musing. This is how it is possible for me to start with the death and dying theme of low light in winter and proceed to the modern media barrage reiterating this theme - constantly, thence to this year’s contributions to my personal “demise” bundle, and finally to the outstanding list of “solutions.” Maybe at the last minute and at the point where I could repent and “save my soul,” I will instead just flip a coin: heads – dead and gone; tails – atomic dissolution and ethereal reformulation. Secretly, I’ll admit it; I really like the latter, “star dust” destiny, but it almost seems too good to be true.

Now, some will say my above musing is not appropriate for our celebratory season of light and life at mid-winter. But I say as important as celebrating light and life is, it is in fact just the warm gloss covering a fundamental human concern – demise and death, which, like it or not, still constitute the root motive or primary cause for the celebratory season itself. However much we moderns seek to avoid the fact, this is the season of cold and dark when our bright smiles

and raucous laughter mask our fears and tears, while, ironically, our media hypes the issue in general and disproportionately escalates our concern. If we are honest, we have to acknowledge the centrality of demise and death in the season, deal with it directly, and try to be Happy in the “Answer” we choose. For myself, I can only enthusiastically ride the cultural carpet of celebration when I have contemplated all of the territory “below.”