

PANDORA'S LAST GIFT

Can anyone tell me what is the antonym for the word, "cynic"? After reflection I come up with "idealist," "romantic," "Pollyanna," "Pan-gloss," and "flower child," all of which are currently considered derogatory. Is it really true that the only opposite of "disillusioned" is "illu-sioned"? Is the opposite of "despair" "naivete," or is there still room for "hope" in our vocabulary?

It seems to me that the floodtide of cynicism which has swamped North America was barely a trickle during my childhood. Perhaps it always seems so, to each generation; there seems to be a general societal agreement that it is well to shield children from our own cynicism until they are old enough to get drunk. I was a freak reading prodigy as a child, and my mother placed almost no constraints on my reading, so I was a cynic at six—but I recall distinctly that in those days if you used the term "Murphy's Law" in conversation with adults or other children, you usually had to explain it. Most movies and books seemed to end with the assumption that Virtue Would Triumph and Love Would Conquer All, even if they took satirical potshots at society along the way. It was possible to shock your teachers by quoting Ambrose Bierce. Only the very rich entered marriage planning for the divorce. We did not feel a need to train our children that any adult who smiled at them was a potential rapist.

We understood that living in the Twentieth Century posed new and extraordinary ethical dilemmas, challenges to integrity and decency, challenges to ingenuity and will—but there seemed a general consensus that we were up to it, or at least intended to go down swinging.

Then a whole generation was somehow capriciously inoculated with massive conflicting overdoses of cynicism and hope, just as it was entering puberty. The richest and most favored generation in the history of the world looked about at the best of all possible worlds to date, and found it so vile and despicable that it must be made over, *at once*. The recommended tools for changing the world were prayer, sex, new drugs, rock and roll, and public rioting—anything at all except rational thought plus learning followed by reasoned manipulation of the world as it was. There was, it must be noted, an under-current of hope in the notion that the world *could* be changed for the better, by *any* means at all. But that hope could not be sustained without intelligence, and intelligence was somehow made to seem inferior to intuition—a poor problem-solver. The Sixties flowered and died in a single great convulsion. The Beatles as a phenomenon lasted less than ten years, broken up by apathy and spiritual confusion and ego and greed. We all got the message that protest led you to jail or hospital, new drugs led to the Manson Family or the Funny Farm, sex led to herpes and trichomoniasis and AIDS, prayer led to Jonestown, and rock and roll stopped leading anything and blundered off into disco. And what did it matter, when any moment ICBMs and nuclear winter would fall?

I think the problem may come down to this: that we are the children of the Great Age of The Media, consumers of more news, and more detailed news, than our ancestors would have believed possible—and that bad news outsells good, time and again, reinforcing every panic, complicating every tragedy, cluttering every attempt to cope. I wish I knew why. There have been attempts to start Good-News papers,

Good-News radio broadcasts—and they always fold within a few years. For some reason the modern news consumer *insists* on being *either* bum-med out *or* distracted with glitter and bullshit, as from ET and Hard Copy and their ilk. No popular news medium in all the world ran with the lead story: Smallpox Eradicated: Mankind's Single Deadliest Enemy Defeated! and so, aston-ishingly, there has never been anything like the worldwide celebration and victory party that this exhilarating achievement merited. Polio too is dead in this hemisphere, did you know? I found the news on page B-14 of my local paper. It wasn't on the TV news.

But if we are getting more and better Bad News than any generation in history, is it any wonder that we are stunned goofy? Robert Heinlein had his character Jubal Harshaw wonder aloud about the pernicious psychic effects of "wallowing daily in the troubles of six billion strangers"—and sometime later Theodore Sturgeon addressed Harshaw's question, in a bone-chilling story called, "And Now The News ... " The hero, driven mad by news, quotes John Donne's line about every man's death diminishing him ... and decides to go out there and dimin-ish mankind right back. The last line is, "He got eight people before they brought him down." Sturgeon wrote this decades before serial kill-ers became a commonplace.

So we all changed . . . in response to relentless, useless alarm signals. Cynical despair suddenly became the very hallmark of intel-ligence, and if anyone heaped more scorn on the hopeful hippies of the Sixties than the ex-hippies themselves, it was those of their contemporaries and near-contemporaries who had been too timid or nerdy to benefit from the Age of Aquarius. Hair got shorter and became layered, beards were domesticated or extermi-nated. Bras and pantyhose reappeared, or rather returned. It became impossible to find anyone who would publically admit to having existed in the Sixties, much less participated in its grand experiments. It had been conclu-sively proven after exhaustive testing—whole weeks of it—that you could not change the system from *outside* the system, and the notion of changing the system from *inside* the system produced such gales of cynical mirth that it could not even be proposed, much less tried. Why, that would be . . . *hard*. Every commentator in the land became determined to remind you that all the hippies have either blown their minds, or sold out in some way or other. A famous *New Yorker* cartoon depict-ing a 20th Anniversary Reunion at Wood-stock—attended exclusively by people in expensive business attire holding martinis—ran *five years* after Woodstock.

When you get afraid enough, you start to get selfish: it's human nature. Cynicism is a clever way of justifying that selfishness, so that you can live with yourself. Just strike the word "cop-out," and substitute the more palatable Post Modern term "burnout." (Be wary, by the way, of any school of thought whose very name is an oxy-moron. They're telling you up front that they intend to travel on square wheels.)

As for myself, I was already a cynic when the Sixties began. I'd been reading Fifties and Sixties science fiction. Hope came slowly to me; I didn't actually join a commune until the early Seventies. I married Jeanne there; we birthed our daughter there; an astonishing succession of Good Things have come into my life since then. Hope has been good to me; so I've written cheery, basically optimistic science fiction stories in which responsible individuals solve great problems by applying their attention and intel-ligence to them.

About ten years ago I found myself backslid-ing. I was writing about problems whose solu-tions utterly escaped me, about people plagued by insoluble antinomy. I began to lose faith in mankind's ability to get itself out of the messes it has made. I ran out of optimistic guesses about the future. I became infected with a threshold dosage of the conviction that we are all merely rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic, waiting for the end to come in the form of nuclear apocalypse or worldwide financial catastrophe or new ice age or meteor strike or planetary race war or bubonic plague mutation or any of a thousand dooms. Despair, like heroin, relieves you of all responsibility. If you truly believe the saw that "No good deed goes unpunished," life is simpler. I told myself that I could take despair or leave it alone, that I'd only do it on week-ends . . . well, on alternate days . . . okay, only on days ending in "y" ...

There was a crazed genius around at that time who made it his holy mission to create a com-puter for normal human beings, a computer that spoke Human, a supertool a child could use. He achieved his dream—but along the way, he made so much money as a side effect that his enterprise grew too huge for him to manage. So he went to a manager, and said, "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water, or do you want to change the world?" Note the Sixties word choice. The manager took the plunge . . . and soon took undisputed control of that enterprise; the founder, Steven Jobs, was "promoted to Global Visionary," lost his parking space in the Apple lot. The news depressed me.

And just then, Theodore Sturgeon died on me.

Everyone dies, but somehow I had expected that some sort of exception would be made for Theodore. He was one of the finest writers who ever worked—in any genre—and everything he wrote was about need, one way or another. He may have known more about need than anyone who ever lived, and he shared it all with us for over forty years. He was also a gentle and loving man, who when I was 35 years old taught me how to hug. His death hit me very hard.

And then summer came, and synchronicity (a fine old Sixties word) struck. Chance brought Jeanne and me near Chatham, Massachusetts, on July 19. Ten years earlier to the day, Jeanne and I had been married in Nova Scotia, in a triple wedding with two other couples from our com-mune. The bride of one couple was sister to the groom of the other (Jeanne's ex-husband, inci-dentally), and they were originally from Chatham. So we stopped in to see how their parents were doing, and to pump them for news of our wedding mates, whom we had not seen in over eight years.

We found both couples *there*; their father was dying. He died later that night.

It was a strange, unplanned 10th anniversary reunion. These were people with whom we had weeded soybeans and chanted om, shared outhouses and thrown yarrow stalks. *A lot* of time had passed. Someone nervously suggested that we all go down to the beach and acquire an illegal smile, and after five minutes chatting under the moonlight someone said, diffidently, "Did anybody see that movie, *The Big Chill*?"—and we all laughed too long and too loud.

But do you know? It wasn't a *bit* like *The Big Chill*!

All six of us were still happily married—after ten years. Unlike Lawrence Kasdan's characters, we all had children, nice kids who weren't on crack. Each of us was doing what we had always wanted to do, enjoying it and surviving if not prospering

at it. We had preserved most of our ideals, and found ways to pursue them in the real world. One couple had been teaching sanitation and erosion control and such in the country of Lesotho, which is the size of a picnic table and entirely surrounded by South Africa. The other couple had helped build the Ontario branch of a worldwide disaster-relief agency called Plenty, which has measurably reduced the amount of agony on this planet. I had managed to earn a precarious living by dreaming happy futures; Jeanne had kept one of the finest modern dance companies in Canada, Nova Dance Theatre, alive in Halifax for eight years, without federal subsidy. None of us had sold out to *People* magazine, or gone Hollywood; none of us had become a burnout or drug addict. We all happened to use the same computer—the one that global visionary created, the Mac. We were *not* brought together by the inexplicable suicide of one of the best of us, but by something more like white magic. Our being there helped them to help their father die, to help their mother through her time of sorrow.

Two days later—in the presence of our own families, who had missed the last one—Jeanne and I got married again on Cape Cod.

All this took place nine and a half years ago, and at last report all three couples are still married, still doing just fine. One of those folks is running for office! I'm still creating futures I'd like to live in, Jeanne is a lay-ordained Zen student, choreographer and part-time Hugo-winning novelist. Through my marriage to her I have come to learn that "faith" is not a dirty word after all. I "keep faith" with her. So I've been trying to make my life a kind of ongoing act of faith, to keep looking for reasons to hope, and to keep hoping anyway while I search.

It hasn't been easy lately. It's been a brutal year, hasn't it? Bombs flying, people dying, cresting waves of witch-hunt hysteria producing cults of mass self-hypnosis (Facilitated Communication, Recovered Memory Syndrome, etc) . . . even the Right-to-Life extremists seem to have decided abortion is okay—if the fetus is in its 200th trimester. Personally, Jeanne and I have had some severe financial and artistic and personal setbacks, excellent temptations to gloom.

But we're still married, after twenty years, more in love than when we started. We just finished our third novel and thus our trilogy. I've had a miraculous, inexplicable total remission of seven years of devastating chronic belly trouble: my guts have literally stopped churning.

We're hanging on to hope—by our fingers and toes, sometimes, by reflex or habit, sometimes, but hanging on. It is not merely desirable to keep morale up—it seems to me it is *necessary*.

If anyone had told *you*, ten years ago, that shortly the Berlin Wall would come down, Mr. Mandela would walk free, the Soviet Union would come apart, nuclear apocalypse would recede, *perfect* music reproduction would become trivially cheap and simple, and Geraldo Rivera would have his nose broken on camera ... would you have believed them?

Cousin, hang on to your eyebrows! The *next* ten years might just lift them into orbit ...

Neils Bohr, one of the founders of quantum mechanics, once said, "The opposite of an ordinary truth is a non-truth; but the opposite of a profound truth is *another profound truth*." Yes: sometimes Life sucks—that's a profound truth. The flip side

is: sometimes it sucks rather well ...

Belief in the possibility of change is what's at the center of this. If you lose belief in the possibility of change for the better, you stop trying, and become part of the problem, part of humanity's dead weight. We'll solve the problems anyway—we always do, eventually—but right now people are dying while the wealthiest and luckiest of us piss and moan about existential angst.

Anything is possible. I once saw a man ski through a revolving door. There is going to be a future: let's chase it until it kills us.

I know a man named Keith Henson. He assumes (believes) he will probably live forever and become infinitely rich. Don't laugh: he's one of the co-founders of cryogenics, so he has a better shot than you do. Therefore the urgent question on his mind is, *assuming lightspeed is an absolute limit, will there be time to closely inspect the entire universe, before it burns out?* Careful calculation persuades him the trick is possible: an army of tourists (perhaps .01% of humanity) setting out in all directions at once at lightspeed within the next few centuries *should* have time to see everything, and still meet at the far end for a Grand Memory-Merge download, before the cosmic candle gutters. So Henson has already struck the Party Committee, and is busy planning the Party at the End of Space and Time. After all, you wouldn't want to get there and find no one remembered the beer, right? Using nanotechnological transmutation (less than a hundred years away, he says; maybe less than fifty), he intends to convert an entire solar system into beer cans alone—and several more into beer. Which will, of course, be recycled many times.

He's a bit stressed; he describes it as a "non-trivial problem." Hope costs. Once you concede that problems can be solved, you have to get up off your ass. Despair, by contrast, is cheap, self-powering, eliminates unwanted guilt, and requires—permits!—no effort. But you die young, and you're no fun to be around in the meantime. Keith Henson is fun to be around. Pay your money; take your choice.

Me, I think we are on the verge of cascading breakthroughs that will make everything we've seen in our lifetimes seem prosaic. Nearly unim-aginable wonders and marvels are just around the corner; if half of the things on the drawing boards pan out, war, hunger, disease and lone-liness really could all be eliminated within a century or less. Even fear (and its cover iden-tity, hate) might conceivably be brought under control within our children's lifetimes . . . ours, if we get lucky.

You may well think I'm crazy. I remember when I was six years old, a seasoned sf reader, trying to explain to my father that one day there would be rockets to the Moon and computers in peoples' houses and robots and so forth. Sure, kid. A few years ago I bought Dad a robot; answers to voice commands, navigates, fetches your drink, US\$48. They've just started selling a Mac that obeys voice commands, reads text aloud, doubles as a hands-free phone, answer-ing machine, rolodex, fax, CD player *and recorder*, and VCR/Video editor . . . and costs exactly what a 128K Mac did in 1984: US\$2,500. The new one can be expanded to *128 megabytes* of RAM. Ten years of progress.

I think human beings can do anything they Goddamn well want to. Remember what Rob-ert Heinlein said: the last item to come fluttering from Pandora's Box was Hope ...