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Infantile Paralysis

Sky Hiatt

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Imagine you have ten people on Mars. They've just arrived and are focused on survival. If they do survive, they'll begin adapting and settling in. If they stay long enough, a Martian culture will take shape. However, after a year, our colonists will be moved to a new planet. A year later, another relocation. And so on. After many years continuing on like this, their cultural profile would become distorted. Their government, if any, would be adapted to change. Their social rituals, if any, would be adapted to change. Their art would be adapted to change. Their language would be adapted to change. Their tools. Their songs, their prayers. There could be a deteriorating sense of commitment, dislike of order and sameness, fascination with novelty and an indiscriminate belief in the value of change. Eventually, there could be a diminished ability to understand what's happening to them, or interest in trying to stop it.

Chronic change is affecting the twin hemispheres of their minds, threatening to lock them in the uprooted phase indefinitely. The brain is an evolutionary marvel, but an eccentric one. It's a developmental oddity that evolved in a freakish sequence of upgrades resulting in unheard of cognitive abilities at every stage. But it did

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this without giving up any of the primordial elements. The brain stem, or reptile brain, took its present form 500 million years ago in the Paleozoic era. To that was added the cerebellum, also prehistoric, and the then limbic system. The cerebrum was added 200 million years later, perhaps as an afterthought. The twin hemispheres, the occipital, temporal, parietal and frontal lobes they are more recent acquisitions. The brain is a haphazard but cooperative system of ancient attics and stair-wells all of which are physically present and obvious in modern humans. Our brain is older than we will ever be. In fact our brain predates us.

We applied our consequent intelligence and built up a formidable material empire unaware we were beginning to out-pace the brain's penchant for geologic time-scales. To maintain a body-mind harmony, things can change but, slowly. Here on Earth, we are much worse off than the Martian colony. Down here things change every day. Even every hour. There's no way of telling how many millions of years ahead of the brain we are by now. In its sheltered, temperature regulated dome of the skull, the brain is burning through logic-boards to keep up with us, while other, extremely useful cognitive components are almost ossifying.

One half of the brain was designed to deal with change, newness and novelty. This was important. The other half was wired to manage constancy and comprehend it. This was vital. The right brain learns quickly and ingests novelty, is novelty-seeking. The left-brain deals with pattern recognition, cause and effect, trends, experiences, prediction of outcomes. Probable consequences. Rational analysis. Without constancy on an epic scale, the right brain can become overburdened while the left side fails to thrive. It's not a degenerative process, but social changes could set up conditions of self-perpetuation. Cognitive imbalance could lock humans into a cycle of perpetual change.

The young of all species are preoccupied with novelty all the time. They are naturally novelty-seeking and programmed to ab-

sorb everything indiscriminately. For humans, as the child grows, the saga of novelty dominates their world. If that world remains constant, sometime between the ages of twenty and thirty, there will be a gradual shift to the left-brain pattern-seeking process. This shift leads to cognitive maturity. In his recent book, *The Wisdom Paradox*, Elkhonon Goldberg calls this the first step in the wisdom phase of human cognitive development. He defines wisdom as a fusion of intellectual, moral and practical dimensions.

Today, in advanced industrialized countries, in any thriving city, change is the only constant. Homes are torn down or engulfed in flames, faces appear or disappear from the workplace, friends move away, jobs flown to India, forests destroyed, rivers dammed, bird songs silenced. In any given year, twenty percent of Americans move from one residence to another. Ninety thousand disappear and are never seen again. We just can't keep track of them. In *The Culture of Technology*, Arnold Pacey warns that such a society will advance counter-intuitively by ignoring the complex of variables and the impact both cultural and environmental, [shutting] down cognitive demand and shifting potential geniuses into deskilled jobs... It's progressive. In successive generations, the debilitating process creates wave after wave of cognitively unhealthy people. Here on Earth, we are exceeding our cognitive replacement rate.

If you are living in a society where novelty levels remain accelerated throughout your life, you may begin to suffer from what Elise Boulding (in *The Clock of the Long Now*) calls temporal exhaustion. She believes humans need a 200-year present, or a pace of change obvious only from a 200-year vantage point in time. Otherwise the mind could become impaired. Some people may experience right hemisphere overload and rebel by allowing selected categories of chaos to drift by them. Others may be locked in novelty mode into the adult years. In extreme cases, cognitive maturation is permanently delayed. In this way the counter-evolutionary pace of

change can subtract higher-tier cognitive processes from the social equation

Such a society may be in ruins, chaos everywhere, while the people living in it perceive it as the ideal life. From within the circle of their cognitive limitations, all is well. The birth and death of fads, acceleration of technological intervals, microchip generations and the macro-momentum of time drives the median cognitive age downward, from elders to adults to young adults and finally to the young. The defective adults notice this but it registers as normal. As Wonderful! How are the immature adult victims of chronic change going to raise a population of pattern-seekers? How is the generation after them going to mature at all? According to Simone Weil in *The Need for Roots*, once uprootedness and commerce have accelerated the pace of life past a crucial tempo, it will have a hold on us, compared to which cocaine is a harmless product.

If we don't have a literal fountain of youth, we have a psychological one. The crescendo of novelty comfortably abides in the right brain. If there is a lag between fixes, you may need to camp at the cineplex for the next film in a favorite series. According to David Loye in *The Sphinx and the Rainbow*, the right hemisphere is also the seat of moodiness and dark thoughts and will tend to register events as more unpleasant than they are. Marooned at this stage, you may need drugs, alcohol or chemicals to get by. Even the novelty-seeking mind needs rest at times. It's rough being cut off from the calming left-brain aptitudes. Plastic surgery may be a superficial adaptation to superficial times. It may also be a way to keep the outer body aligned with the eternally youthful mind. Otherwise, the discord could be unsettling. Top models are the ones with childlike proportions, while the children themselves compete in pageants as miniature grownups mimicking adult mannerisms. Chronic change is blurring the age distinctions. There's a preferred age toward which everyone is deliriously gravitating. The right brain balances dangerously between exhilaration and nothingness.

–from *Deep Time* by David Darling

Like a circus of trained toys. Mechanical immortality. So far, we can't figure out how to eat right or even feed everyone. But first things first. For decades we've been limited to climbing inside the machinery, now the machinery will climb inside of us. Manufactured humans wired to the nano-mind. Will it happen? Look around you, we've been poisoned, but so far, instead of dying, we're intoxicated!

Persistent change will continue altering things even to the invisible level, to all the levels, wiping out species and sub-species indiscriminately. Much is being lost unwitnessed, and without acknowledgment. How will we ever atone for that? Is there terminology to discuss it? Is there a language? Are there words? Our legacy will probably never be fully tabulated. But life is not unconditional.

In *Possessing the Secrets of Joy*, one of Alice Walker's characters complains: Who are you people to never accept us as we are? It is always we who have to change so that we are more like you. And who are you like? You don't even know. Civilization wants everyone to forget who they are and erase their memories and believe in nothing. When the Native American children were sent to the boarding schools in the last century, they promised themselves they would never forget the sacred prayers. They would repeat them and repeat them—the sacred words. But as the years passed, the prayers faded. By the time they were returned home, they had forgotten even the language the prayers were spoken in. They couldn't talk to their parents or to any of their people. The intergenerational cultural bonds had been broken.

Kill the Indian in him, save the man. It seemed harsh, but it wasn't enough. Much remained to be destroyed. The Aztecs practiced human sacrifice. Modern civilization asks only that we sacrifice the mind.

In the learnable world, in wild times, the incessant barrage would register as catastrophic. Learning was different then. Even the very young would begin laying down patterns, seeing the connections, building up the left-brain almost from the beginning. Nothing existed in isolation. Once a child reached the adult state, life would have settled into patterned rhythmic certainty. The right hemisphere would become less vital. Data download would be nearly complete. From this, lessons could be extracted, trends analyzed, patterns detected, tendencies, relationships, prediction of outcomes and possibilities. Left-brain thinking dominates the mature mind and is the seat of wisdom. Normally, this is the final phase, continuing to develop through old age until death. The left-brain is the seat of hope, optimism, contentment and happiness.

But, while many unstable forces are at work, maybe harmonizing forces have been set in place by the governing ellipses of civilization. Maybe we've built in synthetic fixed-constants for consciousness to cling to. Well, there's academic, blue collar, white collar, and industrial disciplinary isolation. There are schools of higher learning deviating novitiates onto the high-strung crests of specialization. That can't be it. There are workers hired to build the pharaoh's tombs where the fabled human potential can be silently interred. There are street cleaners drained of their dreams. There's a pin-point, over-focused workforce subdividing phenomenon into discontinuous blips. There are professionals trapped in a world of knowledge fragments. No, all along the line, the stamp of divisional thinking scars the mind.

And there are other scars. It was once assumed the adult human brain did not manufacture brain cells. New research has proven this untrue. Elizabeth Gould is a specialist in the emerging field of neurogenesis. She traces paths of stress and worry on the brain. She calls this neural wounding a cerebral disfigurement. When a brain is worried, it isn't interested in investing in new cells. Separating children from their parents at an early age can wound the mind.

And poverty provides ongoing stress, especially among children. Some brains never even have a chance.

How is it possible to be aware and responsible, Curtis White asks, in *The Middle Mind*. in a society that prohibits understanding? Or inhibits the ability to conceptualize an alternative social world. How can people whose minds are petrified, save themselves, or save anything? How will they be able to know truth, or perceive honor or virtue? How will they know the lie? How will they decipher fact from fiction?

They say it takes a village to raise a child. But, it also takes the constancy of a village to move adults toward the maturity of wisdom. Physically mature adults are not the final form. Modernity abandons them in the adolescent phase in the midst of their learning. As a species almost completely dependent upon our minds, we need instruction throughout our lives to survive. This is our renowned species strategy. But there are few elders now. Only old folks in the old folks home. In counter-evolutionary fashion, adults must now teach their parents how to cross the mine field of modernity.

When celebrities are interviewed, they often say they knew from an early age that life held special things for them. They weren't surprised at success. They always knew. What they don't realize is that all children have such premonitions. The surprise is when it doesn't happen. Ask any child, they will tell you of the great future that's waiting for them. The will to greatness is a key survival instinct. In naturalistic cultures, heroic opportunities were open to everyone. Healthy cultures invite in courage, heroism, genius, normal mental development. Possibilities to achieve great things are theoretically unlimited. Within the dynamic of the tribe or clan, there was considerable cognitive urgency and transparency. Ideas were sought. The mental trust was maximized, not out of egalitarian beneficence, but out of need. Humans were once generalists immersed in ageless sameness. Everyone learned everything and understood the interconnections. An open cognitive trust was es-

advance together through time, where the honor of plants, wild running rivers, wild dark skies, wilderness and the Earth is the deepest honor. They are sadly estranged from all this. The brain-damaged people of the child mind believe in futures that don't exist. They desire that the past dissolve into a traceless mist to make way for unknown developments.

Within a century after Voyager's launch, it could be that new animals or humans were being manufactured gene by gene, to suit any purpose...emerging as parallel, rival or superior beings... human intelligence hugely amplified... flitting from star to star, forever learning, forever exploring.

—from *Deep Time* by David Darling

Of course! By now we need the robots and the robot brains. If we feed enough data into the synthesized mind and watch the screen, we will comprehend evolution, global weather patterns, star formation. Everything! As a precursor, research labs are stringing together herds of computers to amplify their capacity. Gigaflops, or one billion operations per second, is not enough. They are aiming for teraflops, one trillion operations a second. Manufacturers are now selling clusters as large as 1,250 computers. The buyers name them Medusa, The Hive, Beowulf. The human brain can store 100 trillion units of information. It's not enough. We live in a world we cannot comprehend without the unified digital mind. As computers merge the data strings, the human mind remains submissively sub-divided.

The boundary between human and human-made was no longer decipherable. What had been computers were continuous extensions of the brain... Now man would aspire to technologies that were truly godlike, reassembled at will...

To say that our society is falling apart, says Berman, is to say that it's alive and well. In Jim W. Corder's touching memoir, *Yonder*, he laments, The holocaust happens again and again in small ways, in large ways, in impersonal ways. He's talking about the lost Eden of the eternal present, and the irrevocable past of the past. He quotes Hitler. People will believe anything... sufficiently repeated. Mumford warns in *Technics and Civilization*, Before industrialization, a reorientation of wishes, habits, ideas and goals was necessary. It's been accomplished. Civilization invokes a temporal distortion that has altered the cultural mind.

This storm, piles of debris, wreckage upon wreckage, Walter Benjamin writes in *Theses on History*, this storm...is progress. The digitized content of the World Wide Web surpassed the Library of Congress in 1998 and doubles every few months. Torrents of context-free information, Pacey called it. But he was talking about the telegraph. Eternity has ceased to be a measure of human actions. According to Stuart Brand in *The Clock of the Long Now*, The system cannot be fixed. No one is in charge, no one understands it, it can't be lived without, and it gets worse every year.

Evolution favors species that acquire all they need to know in time to pass it on. If you find yourself in a world the wise among you cannot comprehend, there's a problem. Anti-cerebellum tendencies. Statutory euthanasia of humankind. According to Elk, the mature mind should offer society a vast prism of experience. Herbert Simone, (in *The Wisdom Paradox*) confirms this, Pattern recognition is the foremost mechanism of problem solving. The human brain has 100 million neurons, or about as many neurons as there are stars in our galaxy. Right brain domination is shutting down many of our mental solar systems.

They are beginning to predict a right-brained future. The odds are good. We already have cult-like legions of believers craving the tomorrow of ephemera. The struggles, trials and philosophies of responsible culture are unfamiliar to them. The bioregional, in-traspecies, seventh generation ethic of survival in which all species

sential. Species don't simply materialize and drift forward through time. Out of a thousand that appear, 999 will fail and die away.

Children of the 21st century advance toward non-maturity as their genetic endowment for greatness slips away. The umbilical cord is now attached to modernity. To reach this stage took hundreds of years of cognitive repression and imbalanced minds. Thousands of cultural mistakes were made. The demands of a consumer civilization and hierarchies of power have neutralized many, many minds. Intelligence and wisdom are sabotaged. It's getting harder to understand freedom and its subsidiary themes. If the mind is not free, how can the body follow? White says, Imagination is real, its defining concept is freedom.

According to Loye, the novelty seeking mind, frozen in a youthful phase, tends to see the world around them as, ...inherently divided...broken into smaller and smaller constituent parts. The lost boys and girls of the present may have trouble detecting patterns, fathoming them. The data streams fail to conform to a coherent larger meaning. There are single causes, single solutions, imperceptible connections, receding time horizons. From the neglect of constant life experiences comes one right answer. Black and white. No shades of grey. There are properties at work in separate chambers of the mind. According to Neil Pacey, in *The Culture of Technology*, these non-consecutive thinkers ...will have limited expectations. They will trust the experts, turn to them. Nuclear power plants could be built without plans to deal with radioactive waste. Wars fought not knowing how to end them. Robin eggs disintegrating. Diseases rising inexplicably. The cranial dimensions of Neanderthal exceeded those of modern humans, embarrassing science to the present day. Why would a primitive people need a larger brain than we have?

With wisdom withering worldwide, and chaos intensifying, social skills suffer, social anxiety and violence surface. Parenting deprecates. Clinical neural disease is on the rise. Consider the case of the mysterious nuns of Minnesota the school sisters of Notre

Dame. They tended to live to old age, mentally acute their final days. But, autopsies revealed a medical enigma — evidence of advanced stages of Alzheimer's in the nuns' brains. Elkonon has a theory. They must have been engaged in challenging mental pursuits to the end, and that's what saved them. Life-long learning. His results suggest other things. Working together, pattern expansion and effortless experts increase the amount of brain space allocated to well-practiced cognitive tasks and decrease the metabolic requirements necessary for the effective performance... That is, dealing with patterned familiarity is metabolically efficient and requires less oxygen than processing novelty. The ability to perform complex mental tasks with diminished blood supply serves as a powerful protection against the detrimental effects of cerebrovascular disease on brain function.

Did the cloister of the convent protect the nuns from the chaos of the times? Maybe the benediction of the nunnery functioned in a lull of ritual continuity passed down through the cloistered ages. A haven for the natural mind to mature in. Alzheimer's typically affects the right side of the brain more than the left. Also, in natural aging, the right hemisphere subsidiary bodies begin to disintegrate earlier in life than the left, which barely changes until around the age of fifty, writes Elkonon. Other factors include diet, genetics and contributing illnesses. Is the current epidemic of Alzheimer's aggravated by unrelenting stimulation of the right brain coping with a standing tsunami of change? Is Alzheimer's just another disease of civilization?

If so, are there other stable islands somewhere fostering similar healthy mental tendencies? Well, the Amish have an almost nonexistent risk of Alzheimer's. The disease is also rare among Native Americans in the U.S., and Canada, but only among those living on reservations. Scientists are hunting for the magic gene that protects them and that can someday protect everyone. Genetic therapy conforms nicely to the edicts of a free market system. Beyond the profit motive Dr. Hugh Hendrie wonders if environmental factors

could trigger the tragic illness. The Canadian Cree suggest studying Native diet and traditional remedies.

Then there's the case of the mysterious tribal people of the New Guinea highlands who carry a rare virus almost identical to the one that causes leukemia but never suffer from the disease. When these people descended from the cloud forests into the lowlands, bewildered scientists got busy trying to explain things on a genetic basis. It's not surprising. After all, as Simon Boron-Cohen writes in *Mind Blindness*, Scientists do not conduct research to find things whose existence they don't suspect.

Owing to broadband static and psycho-social blindness, many people are willing to allow the present to define them. They are loyal to the present, obedient to it and defensive of it, even if it destroys them, even if it kills them. Far too many names to put on a wall. It's ironic inasmuch as they don't really want the present. They don't even want the future. They want something called futuristic. Forever withdrawing, never quite here. They will fight for a world someone else will imagine for them—a world better than this one. They've submitted to it before they've even seen it. People unknown to them, whose motives they don't understand, whose values they may not share, are the new superheroes. The directive is to keep totally abreast of innovation. Avoid the curse of obsolescence. This version of the future, novel, distorted, and perpetually changing, appeals to the unhealthy mind. The learning curve is subverted, the natural mind unnaturally distressed. Parables are invalidated. The tortoise no longer wins the race.

Modern men and women must learn to yearn for change, not merely to be open to changes...but positively to demand them, actively seek them out and carry them through...They must delight in mobility, thrive on renewal, look forward to future developments.

—Marshall Berman, *All That is solid Melts into Air*