

Know Thy Enemy

by Carl Saab* (May 18, 2005)

'Unless you know your enemy, you won't know your friend', and 'unless you experience pain, you won't experience pleasure', are compelling arguments. It was recounted that a man was once afflicted with a rare genetic disease and rendered insensitive to pain. He worked in the circus and stabbed himself daily for a living, with needles and daggers, in front of a baffled audience. While spectators frowned with awe and paid tribute to this seemingly agonizing guy in petty cash, he smiled and cared less about his scars. This same man committed suicide at an early age leaving a depressive note behind, explaining, since he never experienced pain, he could never experience pleasure either.

Many political strategists are guided by similar arguments, devoting their careers identifying their enemies, even creating them in case they don't exist, like kids playing Dungeons and Dragons when Dragons are hard to find. Nations play this game too, and people are lead to believe that their entire existence revolves around an antithesis, 'search for and destroy the enemy'.

The little bit of truth I find in these arguments is attributed to a wider vision of 'what' the enemy is, rather than 'who'. Laws of evolution by natural selection make it known to living creatures that many forces of 'evil' lure us into extinction. We've just got to be constantly alert to these evil forces to better adapt and survive. To ignore these forces is to lessen our probability of survival. These evil forces are the 'enemy', and ways to adapt are our 'friend'. To speak of 'enemy' in strictly human terms, that is to restrict our class of enemies to humans, is shortsighted.

Furthermore, submitting to the logic of 'evil forces', one consequently admits different gradation of forces, and a sort of relative 'evilness' among these forces. There are forces requiring more vigilance than others. A spectrum of 'animosity' thus emerges and the dichotomy between friend and foe is blurred.

I go about my daily routine constantly trying to identify 'what' wishes to hurt me, 'what' masks the physical laws of entropy churning my bones and maximizing chaos in the universe: Is it a speeding car or a tornado? But with lions and hyenas absent from our urban lives, man seems to be behind most remaining evil forces: A drunk driver or an armed robber. However, a drunk driver is indiscriminate in his evil to me as a pedestrian, whereas an armed robber is after my wallet. The evil in these forces could be indiscriminate, or pre-meditated. It is the pre-meditated evil in man that strikes me as brutal and vicious (at the risk of sounding naively angelic).

I was born and raised in Beirut, Lebanon, in a region torn by tumultuous conflicts and plagued by pre-meditated forms of human evil. I was thus born and raised (and trained) to identify my enemy at first sight... And I had a bunch! A lot of people simply wanted to torture or kill me; none knew much about me, except that I lived in a certain area with an ethnic majority that needed to be cleansed. Others decried that I belonged to a sect that is malicious, while the rest hated my guts by birth, citizenship, religion, creed or other preferences, including dress code and music. My enemies hated me even before I was born!

I am a friendly person (here I sound naively angelic again!). Short of going on national television and showing how friendly and peaceful a person I am, I sucked their animosity up and dodged every bullet, every Howitzer and every mortar thrown at me for more than 25 years (talk about survival adaptation!) How and whether that made me appreciate my friends better is yet undetermined. But I'm still alive now to reflect back on this concept of identifying my enemy.

Our enemies come in ranks; there is the archenemy, the common enemy, and the fly-by-night enemy. Particularly in the Middle East, entire civilizations are self-determined based on their enemies. Like onion shells, they keep on peeling off layers after layers of enemies until they exhaust all possible enemies, then they create some more. Although this logic might be comprehensible if viewed from a wider angle, the methods seem to be flawed. Enemies in the Middle East are based on deep-rooted beliefs and ethos that may or may not have anything to do with promoting survival of the species. On the contrary, people there seem to be headed to their doom, to extinction, as some of the most persistently stubborn and less adapted species on earth, determined to self-destruction and annihilation.

I rank evil forces in the Middle East by a different order. Today, water resources are shrinking at an alarming rate, including other serious environmental hazards such as waste management and desecration of landscape. Housing, poverty, ignorance, and extremism, all interplay and feed into a cycle of violence and blind us from the true forces of evil.

You are my enemy if you wish me evil. But look behind you and you'll find the angel of death breathing upon your neck in the form of religious fanaticism, poverty and disease. And what do we see being done now in the Middle East to ward off evil forces? Building a gigantic apartheid wall (as if physical walls ever defend us against poverty, disease and lack of water) and spreading irrational odium.

Particularly in Lebanon, once the layer of the Israeli is peeled, there surfaces the Syrian, then the Palestinian, Armenian, Christian, Maronite, Protestant, Muslim, Sunni, Shiite, Phalangist, Communist, Agnostic, Atheist, Leftist, Rightist, Capitalist, Imperialist... Mind you different people have aversions to different onions (and they peel them differently too!)

I have yet to meet in the Middle East more who share with me the same aversion for the same onion, more who would like to peel off its layers in the right order, starting with ignorance, poverty and fanaticism first, and on to environmental issues, including those related to architecture, design and urban planning. These would be my good friends and we would share that onion together over a plate of fava beans and virgin olive oil.

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