

THE ORPHANAGE

As always, victory finds a hundred fathers but defeat is an orphan. Count Galeazzo Ciano

Space explorer Giovanni Galilee gave the following talk to an interested group of students at the University of Space on the planet Fortuous, located in an unnamed galaxy. The talk was given approximately in the year 5000 according to the accepted universal calendar. Briefly, this is what he said.

"I have an interesting and disturbing tale to tell. I was on my way home travelling at super warp speed when a glitch in the power drive obliged me to land my craft on this rather forlorn planet somewhere in the Milky Way. It did not have any apparent intelligent life on it. I had to make some repairs and adjustments. Once done, my curiosity got the better of me and I decided to explore. It quickly became evident that intelligent life had existed. There were plenty of artifacts and structures to so indicate, as well as authored material pointing to a relatively high degree of scientific and technical sophistication. I brought back as much as I could. It is currently being deciphered and studied by experts specializing in alien civilizations. I have taken the liberty of bringing an example. I have chosen the one that I think is most significant, troublesome and provoking. It is a diary. What follows are extracts from this diary of an individual who lived in the distant past of this planet, one that is third from its sun."

I was born on January 1, 3588. In our world, everyone is born on either the first of the year or on June 1, halfway through the year. Obviously, birthdays are celebrated only twice a year. We are all test tube humans, that is, we were all conceived artificially and gestation took place under totally controlled laboratory conditions. Further, we are all clones who have had our DNA modified to produce living beings deemed desirable by our society and our world. I must emphasize that we are not alike. While each of us has different talents and abilities, we have been programmed to work harmoniously in concert with each other. There is no violent and oppressive behavior in our world.

I am aware of our past because I am a historian. We refer to our past constantly to learn from it and not repeat its mistakes, as a learned sage of the twentieth century once remarked. Also it enables us to better understand ourselves. All this came about once we learnt some basic biologic facts about the origin of life and its reproductive processes. Then, via a long and involved series of stages, we reached our current state of affairs. Sexual activity still exists but only for bonding and as a hedonistic pastime. We value our individuality but are quite content to be a cog in the machinery of the collectivity. It permits us to share in the bountiful beauty and knowledge to which, by and large, we are dedicated to preserving and amassing. It would appear that we live on the border of an ideal world, a world that we hope to attain, one that is totally harmonious within and without.

Is there a flaw in this situation? This is a question that has plagued some of us, in numbers steadily growing. A few of us meet surreptitiously, not because we have anything to fear from those in authority, but because we do not wish to raise alarms without a pressing imperative. There is no apparent ruling body, police, judiciary, penal institutions, and no hierarchy of any sort. Our individual achievements are all given the same value. Genetically and culturally, we have been programmed to do and behave as we do. Again, what is wrong?

Is it possible that our discontent or more properly, our malaise has also been programmed? We were conditioned with the notion that progress requires an ability to change. For that to occur, questions must be posed and attempts at answers made. Perhaps we should follow our instincts and travel down this road of doubt leading to a future that is unpredictable.

How did these feelings of uncertainty arise? We seem to be living under ideal conditions. Apparently, we have everything we need. What is wrong? Well, one thing that is amiss is that we all appear to lack certain traits that our ancestors had. These include passion and emotions such as anger, hate, love, envy, jealousy, empathy, compassion, pity, sympathy, sadness, ambition, ennui and excitement. Our existence, while congenial, is without a sense of thrill, stimulation, fascination, captivation and, most importantly, a sense of purpose and meaning. Our architecture is drab in its uniformity. There is no spice, no risk taking, no real freedom and thus no authentic creative drive. Every day is alike and predictable. Our lives are bereft of fables and myths, romance and curiosity. There are no mountains to climb and rivers to cross. We exist in a state of stasis where everything functions as it is supposed to. Even our pleasures, such as they are, are mostly the satisfaction of our latent biology. Our knowledge-seeking activities are purely empirical. We are data gatherers that do nothing but store and classify information. We are not problem solvers since there has not been one to plague us for a very long time. While we have an ability to analyze, our ability to theorize and synthesize is extremely limited. There have been times when I have wished for a natural calamity that would oblige us to change our way of thinking to deal with a novel situation. As yet, it has not happened.

Again, what is the source of our apparent malaise? I attribute it to the change in our genetic make-up and equally to being brought up in an institution, the only home we ever knew. Every facet of our day was carefully regulated, We were either slaves of a system or cogs in a machinery of efficiency. Our caretakers were gentle but humorless, ensuring that we were bestowed with good nutritious food that was tasteless, physical activities calculated to produce healthy bodies, clothes that were solely functional, an education designed to promote homogeneity and acceptance of the status quo and training to fulfill our adult roles. We never knew the warmth, love, rivalry, competition, and the freedom to choose that the children of our ancestors appeared to have. We never had parents to cherish and embrace us and to scold us. We never knew adversity. We never had toys or pets to indulge and produce fantasies.

However, careful studies of the past indicate that in many instances and cultures children were mistreated and exposed to dreadful conditions that killed them. Further, they were also exploited as cheap labor and subject to hateful propaganda that induced them to behave quite irrationally and murderously. Certainly, compared to those our upbringing appears to be most enlightened. Yet, I could not refrain from asking how the idea of bringing us up the way we were arose. Were there precedents? There certainly were.

Even in the most advanced nations, there existed children who were parentless. They were called orphans. This occurred because they were unwanted, their parents had died, were unfit, or simply could not cope because of their economic situation. Mostly, these children were placed in institutions that resembled ours very closely. These asylums were known as orphanages. In some instances, the children became victims of pedophilia and downright cruelty. In a rather odd way, the administrators were as much

trapped within the orphanages as the children and as such were also orphans. Even when they did their best to nurture and socialize the youngsters, they often failed because the demands of the orphanage always took precedence over the psychological needs of the children. It seems that these needs have not been totally eradicated from our genetic make-up and may be the root source of our current straits.

It look as though that we are all orphans and our world is one large orphanage, a most disquieting state of affairs and one that we do not have the means to cope with. As with the orphanages for children, our world is administered by tacit and benign politicians, bureaucrats and so-called experts. They may believe they are in charge, somewhat paternalistically but the truth is, they too, are just as bewildered as the rest of us and are constantly seeking guidance, usually from each other. In the past, when myths and legends were the order of the day, it was easy to give absolute credence to the idea of a chimerical father figure that both guided us and to which homage was due, usually in the form of very colorful and cabalistic ceremonies. Unfortunately, different groups and societies had incompatible ideas of that personage to which they all were slavishly devoted and the forms of the glorification they indulged in. This led frequently to horrific conflicts, something that, fortunately, we do not have to endure.'

"The diary contains much more, however what I have read to you should convey my deep feelings of unease. I do not know what happened to the inhabitants of this sad celestial body. In any case, this diary raises larger questions that I cannot answer. Are all living things in this universe orphans? Is the universe one large serendipity orphanage with no one in charge? If so, is existence devoid of meaning? Is the only reality nothing more than an existential void? Why does existence exist? Why not?"

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