

That Which Soothes the Savage Beast

Music must take rank as the highest of the Fine Arts, - as the one which, more than any other, ministers to human welfare. Herbert Spencer

About a year ago, I returned to Earth after 10 years in space. Now I find myself in solitary confinement in a national security prison. It seems I pose a risk not only to one nation but indeed, to the whole world, despite never having been formally charged in a court of law. Actually, being left to my own devices with no one to bother me suits me quite well. I have always been a loner and never sought the company of my fellow human beings. It allowed me to find space travel very attractive and comforting. However, I do have a story to tell.

During my first two years in space, I visited a number of inhabited planets in many solar systems. While they were at various stages of development they were alike in so far as their future was easily predictable. I have come to believe that recurrently life follows similar patterns along evolutionary lines. I spent the minimum amount of time as required by my directives with each of them. I was becoming bored with my tasks and somewhat blasé about the purpose of my mission, which was to learn as much as possible about new life, especially that which is radically different than our own.

I approached my 16th visit to a planet with a metaphorical yawn. I had no reason to believe that what I was to encounter was any different than the previous 15. I could not have been more wrong. Actually, I did have some reasons for apprehension. As I left the 15th planet and had not decided which direction to take, all my spaceship's instruments went astray. Some force took over the navigation of my craft. I was not able to recover control. It was as if some unseen hand had taken hold. I have never figured out what went wrong. However, being the fatalist that I am, I decided to go along for the ride although with some apprehension.

As time passed I became progressively lethargic. It felt as if time was slowing down and at some point actually appeared to stand still. At this point I fell into some sort of giddy stupor accompanied by a feeling of exhilaration. I do not know how long this lasted. It ended when I started hearing sounds that seemed to originate inside my head. These sounds had a musical quality unlike any I had ever encountered. They called up feelings that I never knew I had and that I have a great deal of difficulty describing. Actually I am exaggerating. I think I am a normal human with the usual panoply of emotions. What was different was that I was experiencing the total range of familiar emotions simultaneously with an intensity that was extraordinary and alarming. I became acutely aware of my surroundings. My spaceship was in the process of landing on a planet that I never knew existed. Finally, it came to rest in a meadow. I still had no control over any aspect of the ship and couldn't even open its doors. I wasn't sure whether the air outside was air I could breathe and even if it contained the appropriate amounts of oxygen and nitrogen. It may have contained lethally toxic chemicals. I had no means of discerning its quality since I still had no control over anything on board the ship.

After what appeared to be an eternity I noticed some very odd looking creatures approaching my vessel. While they were bipeds, they were the strangest looking life forms I had ever encountered. They did not seem to be hostile. The closer they came, the greater the amplitude of the strange sounds emanating from inside my head. The sounds invoked in me a variety of emotions ranging from dread and fear to curiosity and

elation. All of a sudden I found that I was able to resume control over the various mechanisms on board my ship, except those that would permit me to leave. Somehow, I felt that the environment outside was quite safe.

Cautiously, I exited. I tried communicating with the strange creatures using a universal interpreter that had been developed on earth. It did not work. However, it did not take me long to appreciate that the sounds I thought were coming from inside my head were in fact being propagated by these creatures. I tried, by any means possible, to understand their language. For a very long time this turned out to be a fruitless task. They simply did not seem to have a language as we understand that concept. Yet they communicated by means that initially I did not comprehend.

Slowly, other differences between these creatures and all other species I knew of began to dawn on me. For example, their only source of nourishment was a liquid with which the planet was abundantly endowed. To this day I have no idea exactly what it contained. This caused me to fret over my own nourishment. I had no choice. I drank their liquid and to my astonishment it tasted like anything I wanted it to taste like and provided me with all necessary nutritional factors. I brought some back with me but, unfortunately, it was confiscated. Another difference was, there was absolutely no hostility present, at least of the overt nature that usually leads to violence. They seemed to live in harmony with themselves and their environment. I did not perceive any science and technology in the sense that we appreciate those terms. Finally, there were the ever-present musical tonalities that seemed to be at the core of their existence. These sounds far surpassed in beauty and intensity any music I had ever experienced. Despite having no musical talent whatsoever music has always been a singular passion of mine, especially the music of the Masters such as Bach, Beethoven and Mozart. There were no musical instruments that I could perceive. They produced all the sounds from within themselves. To this day I do not know how.

Perhaps if I had been more scientifically or analytically inclined, I would have made an earlier and more graphic description of their social mores or customs as well as their means of communicating. I might have learnt much more about them. During the time I was their guest I grew very fond of them and came to understand that despite how they looked to me, they were truly the most beautiful beings I had ever encountered. For the first time in my life I appreciated the company of others and experienced feelings that I have rarely had before.

As a matter of fact, I experienced nothing other than the total panoply of emotional sensations. The most beautiful music arose while they copulated. There was no shame. It frequently consisted of group sexual interaction. I confess, I did not refuse an invitation to join in these orgiastic encounters and again the experience was unlike, more sublime and beyond the ken of humanity.

After about a year, I finally acquired an appreciation of who and what they were. First and perhaps foremost, they lived a wholly natural existence with no technology at all. Their environment was quite benign, allowing them to live within it their way. For example there were plenty of natural shelters to protect them against climatic extremes a phenomenon, that rarely occurred. They covered themselves with the leaves from trees or foliage not because of any sense of modesty but to protect themselves from rain or excessive solar radiation. This appeared to be driven either through instinct or by some sort of genetic programming but not via any train of rational thought.

I should have grasped their means of communication much sooner. I do not claim to be very smart or discerning. It was all so simple. They do not communicate ideas, concepts or any other abstraction, something that is pre-eminent in nearly all cultures that can vocally and literately converse. Actually they do not communicate in our sense of that concept. Their musical expressions convey nothing more than emotions that are immediately shared by all in the community. It is somewhat like an audience in a concert hall sharing an aesthetic experience with both themselves and the artists responsible. In other words everyone in that concert hall constitute a unity during the performance, which dissipates once the concert is over.

I have given a great deal of thought comparing their culture to ours. I believe that our music, poetry and some of our visual arts are essentially an attempt to do exactly what my new friends do quite naturally. It is just that despite our great artists, performers, composers, and literary figures, we do not come close to what these beings are able to achieve.

Further and in a deeper vein, we purport to be seekers of truth. We started by creating legends, myths and superstitions usually under the guise of some religion or other that were supposed to provide some explanation for the mystery of existence. This turned out to be fruitless since our tales were frequently at odds with each other. Adherents of each mostly relied on an obsessive belief that they were correct and every one else was wrong. Humans then turned to rationality, in the form of science and technology. While providing much about how the universe functions and promising more, little was delivered. They were quite barren when it came to any sort of satisfactory account as to the why of existence.

I must admit that prior to the experiences I shared with my new friends, I had never given any thought to profound philosophic issues. John Keats, the famous English poet is purported to have said that, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all Ye know on earth and all ye need to know." I must add that truth is not only beauty but also consists of all characteristics that invoke in us an array of feelings and emotions ranging from joy to horror. It then occurred to me that possibly the only real way to get at "truth" is not through rational thought, analysis and the gathering of empirical knowledge but through feelings and emotions. Is the artist's truth any less valid than the scientist's?

I had always held that the artists' views were highly subjective and a reflection of their biases. But what if the emotions or feelings were those that were generated and shared by a large community of artists? Would they be closer to truth? I attempted an experiment with my alien friends. I concentrated on the mystery of existence with a feeling of helplessness. They immediately seemed to understand 'the what and why' of my emotional distress. I found myself swept into a vortex of what appeared to be emotional chaos. There came an instant when I 'knew the truth'. Actually I did not know the truth, I sensed it; I felt it; I intuited it. There is no way that words can describe it. Knowledge gets in the way. Knowing is basically an artificial, convenient contrivance. It has its place and its limitations. For the most part, our thoughts and thus what we think we know are couched in linguistic terms. Language, including mathematics has built-in uncertainties. Our nervous systems, with their biochemical limits, are programmed to function with words representing the so-called real world. However, it does not answer the fundamental question and those who are wise appreciate that it does not even attempt to do so.

Finally, there are those who have turned to faith and/or belief as the source of truth. These convictions provide comfort, not truth. They do not provide a solution since they are as man-made as knowledge.

These revelations seemed to make me much closer to the community. We shared many more emotions. However, slowly I began to acquire feelings of loneliness. I longed to return to my home planet. I had a tremendous desire to share my experiences with my fellow humans and perhaps provide them with a novel and benevolent way of living and viewing existence. I periodically examined my ship to ascertain whether it would ever function again. At the peak of my desire to leave, I discovered that the ship was ready to go. I did not even have to calculate the navigational parameters needed for me to get to earth. My friends had obviously felt my despair and had responded. I don't know how.

Once I arrived on Earth, I was immediately quarantined, debriefed and given a most thorough, physical and medical examination. After many hours of in-depth questioning by a series of very sceptical, military and psychiatric experts, I was sent into isolation in a locale that has been kept hidden from me. I have languished here ever since.

POSTSCRIPT:

The asylum was unknown to all except its personnel who were sworn to secrecy. Its location was as far away from any urban centre as possible. Actually it was both an asylum and a prison of sorts, although not one of its inhabitants had ever been formally charged in a court of law. Anyone confined was there for life. However the inmates were treated benevolently. They were incarcerated because they were considered a threat to the nation and in some cases to the world. Some had developed mental disorders rendering them unstable. Since they possessed highly classified knowledge due to their previous high ranking positions, it was considered sagacious to isolate them. Others, such as our space traveller, were simply thought to be a menace. In his case, he presumably represented a peril to the whole world.

The asylum was run jointly by its Head of Psychiatry, Dr. Jones and a high ranking official from the Bureau of International Security, General Smith. They were having their once a week get-together.

Smith: "How is our space traveller doing?"

Jones: Verbal communication with him has, as yet, not occurred. He appears to have lost the ability to speak. All we get are weird sounds that inspire all sorts of feelings that I cannot fathom. As you know, he does communicate in writing. I sent you his account. If what he has told us is true and I am beginning to believe him, then without any doubt he represents a real menace. In his presence, my defences are compromised and I have to make a super effort to maintain my sense of reality. I allow no one to spend any time with him.

Smith: I am afraid that you are correct. After reading his tale I took a sip of the liquid he brought back. I could not believe the feeling of euphoria I experienced. Our best chemists tried and failed to provide its composition. We tried to destroy it to no avail. Anyone who even came in close contact with it experienced the same euphoria I had. It appears that continuous exposure to our space traveller and the liquid could render us

totally helpless in the face of some enemy alien. The liquid is currently buried deep in a mountainous area know only to me. What I find truly bothersome is that somewhere out in space there exists this planet inhabited by aliens that may pose an unacceptable risk to all other civilizations. It may become incumbent on us to find and destroy them. Hopefully, we can, before they start spreading their wings if they haven't already. As for our space traveller, he must be eliminated.

Jones: I agree. However, it is impossible for anyone to approach him and he appears to be immune to any poison we can concoct. For the time being all we can do is to keep him isolated. Fortunately, that is what he prefers, since if he wished he could easily walk out of this place and be the cause of peace, love and sister/brotherhood, leaving us all totally defenceless against our enemies. It has become worse. Each time I am in his presence I feel that I am a suppliant, pleading for forgiveness. Further, I am certain that in due course I would become his disciple as I fear would anyone else exposed to him.

(DÉJÀ VU)

Jack Basuk

Dec. 20, 2001

<http://www.jackbasuk.com>

Author's Note: To a certain extent, my space traveller's story, represents a personal credo. I cannot determine how and to what extent my thinking was influenced by Kant, Hume and by Roszak, a contemporary of mine, but it certainly must have been.