

Essay Archive 3: From a Coming Collection (2006 - present)

"A word after a word after a word is power." - Margaret Atwood

With the dawn of a new millennium, my general response to it as a writer has been a shift from the free and lofty spirit of poetry to the seriousness and substance of prose – for the most part, essay writing. As much as I still love to versify, poetry was becoming ever less suitable and effective for expressing the complex thoughts and feelings brought on by events in the early 21st century.

After the publication and release of my second novel, which will be a cautionary tale to end all cautionary tale about the climate crisis, I will be releasing a large collection of essays titled: *If It Happens Out There, It Happens In Here*. It will be an audiobook, and I will be doing the reading myself. Along with a few dozen substantive essays dealing with some of the more pressing issues of our time, there will be a large set of short, pithy pieces that succinctly focus on an even wider range of topics, and a small section of quips, witticisms, and aphorisms will round out the book. In this the third section of the Essay Archives, I thought I would provide members with a handful of essays here as a sneak preview of the collection to come.

* * *

As mentioned, my second novel of fiction addresses the climate crisis, and it is my contention that all our environmental problems from pollution to climate change, and everything in between, stem from one common cause...

The Biggest Elephant of Them All

Here's one we all need to worry about, and the time when we should have started to face up to it has long since passed. It makes no difference if you believe climate change is real, if you don't, or if you don't even care one way or the other. This one basic, inescapable fact eclipses all other ecological

concerns and crises, looming larger now than ever before, and we no longer have the luxury of pretending it isn't there.

I don't know how we have managed to suspend this unavoidable and terribly imposing fact of human existence for so long, and somehow tacitly agree to indefinitely delay considering what to do about it. But we have. No one ever mentions it, and I've been thinking about it since I was a kid. Well, that's all going to change very soon. In fact, according to the latest scientific evidence, the consequences of ignoring the biggest elephant in the environmental room are finally upon us, and it is undeniable.

A new report from World Wildlife Fund Research shows that well over half the world's population of vertebrates, from fish to birds to mammals, have been wiped out in the past four decades. Between 1970 and 2014, there was a loss on average of nearly two-thirds of wildlife species around the world. In Central and South America and the Caribbean, wildlife populations have declined by 89%. Canadian species such as the barren-ground caribou and the North Atlantic right whale are in decline, as well as migratory species like songbirds and monarch butterflies that breed in Canada.

But here's the kicker – the WWF says climate change is a growing threat, but it is not the main cause of this devastating loss. The biggest drivers of these declines are loss of habitat and overexploitation, with increasingly more habitat fragmentation due to increasingly more human-built infrastructure like roads and bridges. And steadily increasing levels of air, water and soil pollution are also taking their toll.

Under all the scary numbers, between the lines of the WWF report, and even behind the emerging prognostications about the dire consequences, is a future reality driven by a past failure. We have ignored its approach at our peril and that of the entire planet. It is the pesky pachyderm that has been sitting in the corner of our "green room" since the beginning of time, and it is simply this – the earth is a finite body in space, the human population continues to grow apace, and we are, quite literally, running out of room!

I did the math and some basic research, and what the numbers revealed is ominous indeed. The rate of growth is slowing somewhat, but there are still well over twice the births than deaths per day. When I was born in 1958, there were less than three billion people on the planet. Now I'm over sixty, and we're rapidly approaching eight billion souls – the population has more than doubled since I've been here. It is surely no accident that we also lost about two thirds of our wildlife species in the short time since I showed up. It took

over two hundred thousand years to reach one billion, and only two hundred more to reach seven billion. The projection for 2050 is almost ten billion, and if it keeps going this way there will be over eleven billion by 2100. And all that will happen over the course of our grandchildren's lives.

There are a lot of ways to look at it, but they all have the same disastrous implications. When it comes right down to it, it's just a matter of dividing the number of people on earth into the acres of habitable land. About 57% of the earth's land is uninhabitable (deserts, mountains, etc.), which leaves 24,642,757 square miles or 15.77 billion acres of habitable land – just over two acres each. That's before you look for water and natural resources.

Now, unless you're expecting natural disasters, war, famine, and disease to happen regularly enough to knock down the total, you're going to have to get used to the idea that it's going to get messy going forward. That has already started, and it is accelerating. Even if we were somehow able to stop all the carbon burning completely, we would reduce the impact of global warming, but we would still be just forestalling the inevitable. Why? Because all the pollution, the vulnerable ozone layer, and global warming are all just symptoms; they're the earliest ominous signs of the real problem, and there will be hell on earth long before we get to the point of rubbing elbows with each other.

No matter how you slice it, there is but one solution – some of us are going to have to leave. I know it sounds crazy, but there is really no alternative if humanity wants to live beyond the crisis. Any plan to reduce and stop population growth that doesn't involve getting off the planet would have to be one that works continuously to maintain a workable total, which would probably be below the current population level. Massive space stations like orbiting cities, colonization of the moon, whatever works – we must leave. Still not convinced? Bearing in mind that the earth is the same size it has always been, if not a little smaller, check out <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/> for the running count of the global population in real time. It is strangely compelling and sobering, to say the very least.

In the sixties there was the race to the moon between the Americans and the Soviets, with two programs designed to get into space for the same basic reason as Sir Edmund Hillary gave for climbing Mount Everest – because it's there. But when we begin to acknowledge the presence of the aforementioned elephant, hoping to be finally recognized in our environmental room, our reasons for a space program change from the lofty goals and curiosity-driven science of the sixties to far more necessary, practical considerations that call

for science to be more urgent and solutions driven. We must not conquer space because it's there, but because all of us are here, many more are coming, and we just don't have the room anymore.

* * *

A few summers ago, we woke one morning to hear that celebrity chef and host of the CNN series "Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown", had taken his own life. It was one of those cases where friends and family were taken completely by surprise, with many of them saying there was nothing happening in his life that would make him suicidal. His life was better than ever, and he was by all appearances a happy man. I decided to dig a little deeper...

Private Parts, Known and Unknown

Anthony Bourdain, 61, commits suicide in a Paris hotel room. As with many other beloved, ostensibly happy and successful celebrities, we are saddened and puzzled, unable to understand why. We know he had overcome serious adversity and addictions years earlier, like so many others; he had had many years of sobriety since and a loving family life. Those who knew him say he genuinely loved life and laughter; and, of late, he had achieved more fame and wealth than ever. And yet...

Apparently, everybody wanted to be Anthony Bourdain except Anthony Bourdain. What does this mean? There are seniors facing slow, painful deaths who decide to check themselves out before the going gets too rough; addicts leading a life on the edge, who either purposely or accidentally overdose, or have long ceased caring either way. But suicide by someone like Anthony Bourdain rattles us in a peculiar way because it makes no sense. Or does it? I believe the answer lies in gaining a better understanding of addiction and appreciating that it is more a symptom than a disease – a symptom so complex and onerous it is a disease unto itself.

Anthony would tell you, now that he can, that a deep, inexplicable emptiness and pain had been stalking him from his childhood on into his adulthood. It is this, as a direct result of some sort of early unresolved

trauma(s) in his life, the suspension of which he carried with him every day of his life in his mind, body and spirit, that leads to an entirely understandable desire to escape. This desire grows to become a need; and, unchecked in this culture of abundance we are swimming in, inevitably leads to an addiction to one or more substances or habits readily available.

So, if all that's true, we tend to think that people like Anthony, having beaten their addictions and gone on to a much cleaner and better life, should be fine. But he wasn't. We tend to forget or fail to account for the fact that addiction arises as an escape route from some unresolved trauma, and from having to carry on living with that unresolved trauma. Anthony beat or at least severely curtailed his addictions, and he did go on to have years of sobriety and even greater success. But at the top of his game, even after all that, right on up to the minute he checked into that Parisian hotel, that deep, unfathomable emptiness, and the always like-new pain remained.

It's not hard to see how this could lead one to conclude that there is nothing that will ever help, reducing the question down to a simple matter of determining when enough will finally be enough. Even with addiction kept at bay, the need to escape remains. One becomes utterly exhausted from failing to win happiness out of a lifetime of overwhelming, unrelenting misery; and the time comes for finally allowing the ultimate solution that has been waiting just outside the door for a lifetime to come in. For Anthony Bourdain, that time came this spring in the city of light and love.

Unfortunately, what is happening to celebrities in recent years are famous examples of what is happening to more and more people in our society. Suicide is on the rise. The latest stats show that here in the developed world there has been a 20-25% spike in suicides since the turn of the century, and for more than half of these cases there was no known mental illness. Even so, depression and anxiety certainly seem to be more prevalent, which is a boon to pharmaceutical interests, and they're debating whether the statistics actually reflect a rise in reporting of mental/mood disorders and attention to these matters, rather than an increase in prevalence. In any event, each of us has been traumatized in some way, to some extent, resolved or unresolved. Nothing new there save our improving treatment of trauma. But I believe our ever-smaller world contains more significant traumatic events, geo-politically and otherwise, for individual human hearts and minds to cope with than ever before in history, triggering and resonating with our own personal trauma.

I have concluded that, like the microcosm that is Anthony Bourdain, there is now a palpable sense of emptiness and profound pain creeping across

the lifeworld of contemporary humanity, the analysis of which is beyond the purview of this essay. But if we looked more deeply into that microcosm, we would find a number of other parallels between Anthony's story and those of society. Hopefully, society will meet a better end. Suffice it to say that the human race exhibits plenty of evidence that we are growing tired of failing to be happy, as individuals and as a race. Signs of these times include an Ivy League college now offering students a course titled "How To Be Happy". And the greatest challenge to those of us lucky enough to be born into the developed world, is to appreciate just how fortunate we are, and derive some degree of happiness and contentment from it.

And me? How am I doing? No worries. I'm good. For a guy who has obviously given this subject a lot of thought and had more personal experience with such challenges on his own protracted pursuit of happiness than he cares to revisit, I'm doing very well. I will concede that I've had occasion to consider suicide in the distant past, especially over one five-year stretch of disability and poverty, when I had to make a fresh decision not to do so almost every day. But even then, the thought was immediately rejected each and every time, with an apparently unshakable belief that life is worth living kicking back in. I've had my struggles with addiction too, but I've overcome the worst of them, and I currently keep my tendency towards addictiveness in check. So, I'm doing okay.

No, really...I am!

I have proven to myself that no matter how bad it gets or how deep my despair, I could never see suicide as a solution. Life is much too interesting to get up and walk out in the middle! I'm curious about tomorrow, and I try to learn from yesterday. I love to laugh and sing, I love engaging people, and can't wait to see what they'll make me say next. I have a son and beautiful grandkids, and I'm the kind of person who gets up every morning looking to contribute and make a difference. No, I'm far more likely to kill myself tripping and falling down a flight of stairs somewhere than by my own hand.

But wait!

Early trauma and adversity - check. Struggle with and ultimate victory over addiction - check. Lust for life and people - check. Sense of humour - check. An ongoing quest for happiness - check. So far, I have everything on Anthony Bourdain's list, so how can I give anybody assurances that I'm okay?

Well, we are all unique souls on many different levels. So, life, its impact on us and how we deal with it, is unique for each of us. More to the point,

those who come to an end like Anthony, with all due respect to the lover he left behind, may not have been blessed with finding the right partner – the right partner for him. Such a partner does more than love you (though in my case that's a tall enough order in itself). It is someone who opens up a safe space in your life; a space that allows you to do the work necessary to come to grips with your personal trauma(s), even as she/he is grappling with their own trauma; someone who doesn't try to change you, but instead elevates and inspires you to change yourself for the better, as only you can.

We all need a partner or a close friend like that. It doesn't have to be a spouse. It can be a family member, a friend, even a good therapist. But we all need it. There is simply no need to be utterly alone in this world. It is contrary to healthy human nature. Depression is, by definition, a crushing feeling of loneliness – even more reason to help each other not to be actually alone, whatever it takes. And if we succeed in staying vigilant in looking out for each other's mental health, we ensure there is always someone there, someone with a hand to hold on to when someone in crisis reaches out.

My partner, bless her heart, will think I shouldn't have shared so much of my private life in this essay, and that I shouldn't have even shared that! That is her lovely, quiet way. As a public advocate for mental health and illness awareness for almost twenty years now, and an artist all my life, I know there is penetrating power in using one's own story to raise awareness; example being the best tool for teaching.

We also need to redefine what we have come to believe is happiness. We have falsely convinced ourselves of what constitutes happiness, with a steady diet of commercialism in the form of mainstream television and movies that projects an inauthentic, often dangerous conception of human happiness. But it would be better to begin from the premise that we are works in progress, all the way from birth to death. Happiness should be a more realistic and achievable goal, freely acknowledging that life will challenge us, sometimes severely, while still holding out hope for a future when life will be better than it is right now. With a pragmatic, sensible course set, we live more contentedly and effectively in the present, in the now. And less expectations moving towards the future means less disappointments when it comes into the present. It just makes sense.

There is only one thing to do with news stories of celebrity suicides, and even with suicides closer to home, but we must make sure to do it – learn from them. We seek to raise awareness and encourage people to look out for each other, to watch out for signs there may be a problem. But we should also check

ourselves regularly, keeping an eye on our own mental health, and being completely honest with ourselves about it. An ounce of mental health prevention is worth a pound of mental illness treatment.

* * *

Is there anything more precious in humanity than our children? Is there anything more important and seminal than our children's education? Probably not, considering all that flows from it. But of all the things wrong with our education system and its policies, to my mind, concentration on matters of science as we downplay and even ignore the arts, is our most egregious, ongoing pedagogical mistake...

A Balance Unstruck

When you teach a child to value the arts as much as the sciences, you teach that child to value both halves of her/his brain, left and right, which is to value her/his complete, balanced being. You are helping her/him learn to balance it for themselves. And there is much more at stake here than a better appreciation of the contribution of art and artists to the human condition. On closer examination, we find that everything we know as human depends on achieving such a balance.

When we speak of the sciences, we may be referring to subjects like physics, biology, medicine, astronomy, chemistry, etc.; or the rise of all things electronic in the 20th century like radio, television, and telecommunications in general; or the almost daily technological advances that generate exponential growth in their fields and go on to spawn new fields. Thinking in terms of science, we appreciate everything we have wrought with it, from the invention and industrial application of the wheel, through to the assembly line of manufacturers, and on to computers, the Internet, and beyond.

Science (left brain) is about measuring, calculating, analyzing, and quantifying. It is logical, methodical, and numerical. It seeks to test and prove, to harvest and interpret data to establish hard facts. It is all this and so much more. But we are obsessed, even intoxicated by science nowadays, at the expense of the other full half of our brain and being. It is driving us

impulsively and blindly on, often in directions we don't fully realize we have taken until it is too late. Science and our ultra-scientific bent need to slow down. We need ballast and counterbalancing. We need the arts.

When we speak of the arts, we may be referring to music, painting, sculpture, prose, poetry, acting, etc., or more recent multi-art disciplines like the recording arts, filmmaking, animation, and the many other applications of technology across all fields of creative endeavour. Thinking in terms of art, we appreciate our feelings and our imaginative and creative thought processes as human beings. We cherish stories and myth; and we exercise our innate need to express, to understand, and to be understood. It is what gives our individual and collective histories meaning; even as it allows us to grasp the reality of humanity in the present and aspire to a better future.

Art (right brain) is about creating and giving colour and character to our lives. It seeks to give hope, inspire, love, intuit, feel, and feel for. It is all this and so much more. But as much as we all fill up our lives with art works and agree we can't live without them, we nevertheless take them very much for granted. We don't give the artist (or their work nearly the level of respect and esteem we readily accord the scientist. We don't respect art as much or as deeply as we should; nor do we give artists the funding to do what they need to do... or, rather, what we need them to do. This, and the fact that it has been going on for centuries, is precisely what is wrong with humanity today.

Ultimately, we have been failing to integrate the two, to bring them together into a healthy, balanced harmony, and we have been failing at our peril. We have yet to fully realize the equivalency of the two halves of our brain, the two halves of who we are. And we don't realize the balance that they are, or ought to be, both in our lives and inside ourselves.

Each one of us is naturally either right or left-brain dominant to some extent, but more than seventy percent of us are left-brain dominant – another indication of how top-heavy we are with science. Favouring science at the expense of art, whether as individuals or as a society, we end up with what we have today – a headlong hell-bent rush for progress, just because we can, without asking why or whether we even should. As Edward Abbey once said: "Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell."

The imbalance within us is a microcosm of the imbalance in our world. It is at once the cause of our ills, and the dysfunction behind our apparent inability to meet the profound threats to the species and the planet we currently face. This is unsustainable, and we live with the consequences as

things start breaking down all around us. Indeed, the persistent, ever-worsening imbalance of the two since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution is how we lost our way, and it is responsible for the state of humanity today.

To teach all children to value the arts as much as they value the sciences would be to take significant corrective action to bring the balance to humanity that it needs. It is the only way. If we don't correct the imbalance soon it will be our undoing, and our epitaph may well read: "They had too much science, not enough art; too much mind, not enough heart."

* * *

War has been a mainstay in human history from the beginning. But in our current world, we seem to be in the early stages of a transition away from war and on to a more peaceful world. It is slow going, and there is a great deal of doubt as to whether we will ever get there. But whatever you think about this, it is making our annual recognition of the sacrifices made by our fighting men and women in conflicts down through the years more complex and difficult to reconcile.

With every Remembrance Day since I was old enough to know why we observe it, I felt appropriately sad and respectful. But there was always the nagging feeling that there was something amiss. As the years passed and I grew to understand more about all the factors involved in making war and peace, I came to realize that we don't go far enough with our remembrance. Finally, early in the new millennium, it was time to properly make the argument...

Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: The Dual Purpose of Remembrance Day

With each passing year, Remembrance Day becomes more challenging because it is becoming more relevant. Modern warfare being what it is, the message has never been more urgent. War has always been our greatest purposeful wrong as a species, our most blatant and costly example of man's unkindness to man, played out over and over with sickening consistency from the beginning. But viewed in the context and accelerating techno-science of the last hundred years or so, and given the sum of apocalyptic threats we face in the 21st century, we've certainly taken it up a notch or two.

I think veterans of all past conflicts would say that, however sincerely we remember and honour their service and sacrifices, there is one thing we need to learn above all else: we must find a way to stop using war as a response or a solution to conflicting interests between people, groups of people, nations, or groups of nations. Amid remembrance of our veterans' service, and the ultimate sacrifices of so many, we should be thinking equally of the real horrors of war, the untold pain and suffering it has exacted, the sheer waste of life and limb, the loss of so many futures, and what we can do to put an end to it. Put in another, less gentle way, until their actions in battle on our behalf inspire us to act to bring about lasting global peace on their behalf, we fall short in our remembrance, and in our honouring of them.

Back in the sixties, we used to ask: What if they held a war and nobody came? A nice thought, but it was just as hopelessly idealistic as the decade. We have a great deal of work to do if we want to begin actualizing it, starting with adopting a more realistic, authentic appreciation of what war really is, and why it persists despite all it does to us. It is not people coming to war, but rather the holding of war in the first place, that should concern us most.

The legions who have fought and died throughout the history of human warfare, whatever side they were fighting for, right on up to the last person killed in a military conflict somewhere in the world today, did not die for king, or country, or anything of the sort. Let's be honest. They didn't give the supreme sacrifice because they were patriotic, or because they were fighting for a peculiar brand of democracy, communism, or some other sweeping ideology. If they did, they were convinced of it, as many were, but not in truth. The war wasn't their idea; and, if given the option, they would never have chosen to have a war, let alone personally participate and possibly die in one.

When it comes right down to it, human beings have fought and died in wars, and continue to do so, because human beings still haven't found a better way to settle their differences. Furthermore, as individuals, I'm sure most of our veterans alive today, and those who lost their lives fighting somewhere in the past, were simply trying to survive the horrific existential circumstances they found themselves in, and because the people on the other side were trying to kill them for the same reason.

Rethinking the whole issue would help us better bear the duality in mind. Instead of bemoaning war in terms of what it has taken from us, we should be more honest with ourselves and think in terms of what we have given to it. Maybe then we would take responsibility for what we have wrought and own it. No war is an accident. It does not befall us like some

natural disaster. It is not something that keeps happening to us. It is something we allow to keep happening, something we make happen. We glorify and even romanticize it!

I can't help thinking that if we had been giving our artistic nature the same attention, time, resources, and devotion we have been giving our scientific nature since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, maybe we would have solved the human problem of warfare long before now. And maybe, just maybe, we would have seen the light earlier about one or two other human-made problems that also threaten us with extinction.

Lest we forget? Indeed.

Ask any veteran. She/he will tell you that remembering and honouring them, and those who have fallen in military service, as necessary and proper as all that is, will never be enough. We must remember and forever respect their service and sacrifices on our behalf, but we cannot forget why it is so important. We do them a great disservice if we stop there, paying mere lip service to the horror itself. We must finally see warfare for what it is – our greatest intellectual, moral, and spiritual failing. Maybe then we will earn a Remembrance Day with the full import and impact we need it to have; and, with time, it may evolve into a cause for celebration as well as solemnity.

* * *

With equality for women and a host of other vital matters now being championed in social justice movements, it can be a legitimate challenge to keep up with it all, and to always do the right thing considering these important changes. For a while I have been looking to address this in an essay, but a personal experience of tripping myself up on social media brought it all home to me...

My Bad

The dawning of the #metoo movement, as hard won and welcome as that was, gave me a false sense of security as a man. I know that now. I learned my lesson the hard way, and I have made the necessary adjustment. But example is one of the most effective aids to comprehension, so I thought I would use myself and this experience to get an important point across.

You see, I am a man who has always held the principles of feminism and equality near and dear to his heart. It accompanies my thinking as a writer and philosopher; and those principles have been incorporated into my personal behavioural guidelines, and placed on the list of things I deem to be universally true, at an early age. Maybe it was the way our parents brought us up, modeling equality for us; or it could be because I grew up with two younger sisters and no brothers, making gender equality a fact of life for me from the moment my first sister was born. Needless to say, when the #metoo movement came along I was down with it all the way.

An unfortunate but instructive by-product of this mindset for such a man, living and loving in the contemporary world, is the life-long painful stream of occasions when the words, attitudes, and/or actions of other men gives just cause for genuine gender embarrassment. Such wince-worthy occasions have become especially acute on social media in recent months. So, as you can imagine, I thought I was doing fine. Cocky and clipping along, lulled completely into that false sense, and maybe just a bit too self-righteous in spirit regarding the issue. Until one day, out of a clear blue sky, and despite my tried-and-true egalitarian and feminist orientation, I was so suddenly and obviously wrong; and this time, I was providing the cause for gender embarrassment myself!

It was a flippant comment, made in fleeting response to someone's post, intended purely as an attempt at wry humour, which I thought at the time was harmless enough. It turned on a common word with two possible meanings/senses. I can honestly say that I intended it in the unoffensive sense; in fact, the pitifully bad joke I was trying to make depended on it. But, alas, one of my Facebook friends took it the other way, the sense that could easily be interpreted as offensive, and she rightly took exception, simply posting: "That's not funny."

Well, I don't mind telling you, I was immediately and utterly mortified. The unfamiliar sense of shame I felt made sleeping difficult for me that night, and dogged me for days thereafter, until I finally came to better understand what had happened, and what it meant. The lesson I learned, which I want to pass along with this story, is this - even those of us who believe we have it right can get it terribly wrong and inadvertently hurt someone, unless we instead care to always mean not to. Please allow me to explain.

Even a man who is squarely behind the movement for women's equality, against sexism and toxic masculinity, who has championed the cause routinely and sincerely throughout his life, must nevertheless be ever vigilant - not just

for the words and actions of other men, but for his own. It is not enough to do the right thing, or mean to do the right thing, on purpose. We must also mean to not do the wrong thing, inadvertently or otherwise, on purpose. As adults, we are responsible for what we say and do, as it should be. But we must learn to own our words and deeds, even before we speak or act, if we really care to do no harm. In my case, I failed to consider both meanings of the word and, so, failed to account for how the meaning intended could be legitimately taken wrong. That's on me, and I have pledged to do my level best to see that it doesn't happen again.

That means taking time for reflection, gentlemen, which means "test-driving" what you have in mind before you allow it to leave your mind and enter other people's worlds in the form of words, attitudes, or actions - whatever the subject. That's not easy in our work-a-day world of cares, concerns, and circumstances, I grant you; but it's necessary all the same if you genuinely want to be sure you're a man who walks his talk, who is part of the solution instead of perpetuating the problem.

This experience gave me a real scare, and it got me thinking about how I might hard-wire this deeper, more circumspect awareness into my male *modus operandi*. Being open to this, it wasn't long before I discovered and joined the ranks of the U.S. based men's group NOMA, the National Organization for Men Against Sexism. Their mission is clear: "Pro-feminist, LGBTQ+ affirmative, anti-racist, and enhancing men's lives through a deeper understanding of gender, race, and sexuality." Just what I and likeminded men need these days. There's a wealth of information, articles, and initiatives, and I find that just having their posts appearing regularly on my FB timeline is a resource for my ongoing education. It also helps me stay alert to these issues, and to my comportment in relation to them. Check it out, guys!

Look. It's simple. If you are a contemporary man who gives a damn about the kind of world you are leaving your kids, supporting #metoo in any way you can and calling out blatant instances of toxic masculinity on your watch is your duty. Learning how and getting better at doing it, like anything else, is a process that takes time and effort. Personally, I am quite capable of feeling genuine compassion for people dealing with terrible circumstances like death, hunger, etc., even acting to help them in some way, and still have sufficient time and spirit left to lend support to and learn from something like the #metoo movement. I can walk and chew gum at the same time, ethically speaking, and I believe most people can if they care to.

I'm old enough to remember a time when drinking and driving was commonplace; when people casually chatted about "niggers" and "faggots" they have never met; when anything but heterosexuality was evil and unthinkable; and when the average Joe considered mentally ill folks to be little more than crazy, stupid, and inferior. Thankfully, we're getting a better handle on these matters. We're doing it by caring to change how we think, behave, and speak about these things, and we are better, more civilized people for it.

The #metoo social justice movement is the current teachable "moment" in human history; and when we consider the marginalized, oppressed and subservient role given women over the long course of that history, I believe we would do well to consider making a few adjustments in support and understanding. How else would we demonstrate support and understanding, anyway? Just saying we support it is not support. That's the status quo. No, we can only support this cause by recognizing and acting on the need to curtail language, attitudes and actions that offend.

They say the worst thing you can do when giving advice is expect it to be taken. I left those expectations behind a long time ago. I just offer my honest perspective, the only one I have, as my humble contribution to dialogues about things I think are important. It's harmless enough, I'm pleased to do it, and it beats the hell all out of going on Facebook and telling everybody what I had for breakfast!

* * *

Human sexuality is a funny thing. Not ha-ha funny. I mean odd, strange, even perplexing. Specifically, I find it fascinating how we rightly rule out certain things in the sexual context, but then toy with the very things we strove to exclude.

Few things reveal more about the depth and complexity of our humanity than the way we employ language in different contexts. We even bring the language from one context into another, sometimes purposely, other times without realizing it, which is revelatory in and of itself. This is never truer than with the language we use in reference to sex; and our sexual language borrows from some of the most unexpected and risky places...

Dirty Sex in a Civilized World: Walking a Fine Line

At Christmas time in recent years, due to the advent of social justice movements and the public's elevated awareness on such matters, there has been a kerfuffle over the appropriateness, or lack thereof, of the old yuletide song "Baby, It's Cold Outside". The reasons for objections to the song, and there are several, are largely based on some lyrics that obviously betray a time before the expansion of our collective social conscience, and so have been deemed inappropriate for usage today. Irrespective of objections to the song and the prevailing "cancel culture", however, I have a much more complex fascination with such terms as "Baby", and how we choose to use them.

First, to dispense with the initial point, it would be wrong to have a problem with the use of "Baby" in most contexts as sexist because it is such a universal, gender-neutral term. Partners on both sides of a relationship, heterosexual or otherwise, routinely use "Baby" as a pet name for one another inside and outside the bedroom – during sex, in social situations, while shopping – you name it. Every second hit song uses it. And even in completely different societal contexts, such as among members of a sports or sales team, "Baby" is a term with a whole other sense of endearment attached.

It would be possible to argue that "Baby" isn't a sexist term at all, but for one crucial and inappropriate context – when said by a man in power to a woman he has power over, in a business/professional situation. One of the most famous examples of this was when P.C. Finance Minister, John Crosbie, called Liberal opposition MP, Sheila Copps, "Baby" during question period on the floor of the Canadian parliament some years ago. Of course, its usage in this way will always be offensive and unacceptable.

But with all that said, I ask you to reflect on the term "Baby" as it is used in a sexual context by people of all sexual orientations. Consider it in a different light, and start by asking yourself this question: If as civilized people we rightly believe there is no place for children in the sex lives of adults, why do so many people enjoy "playing" with childishness and/or childlike concepts within the sphere of their sexual activity? Put another way: Of all the terms that could have become universalized and gender neutral as a pet name or term of endearment in people's sex lives and beyond, why did "Baby" resonate with so many people and become so common and widespread?

I believe this is a fair and fascinating question. And it's not just with the use of "Baby" that people incorporate child-related terms and concepts into

their sex lives. It shows up in many other places. Nabokov's literary classic *Lolita* tapped into the idea in a big way, and similarly themed stories and interpretations of situations abound in our culture. So-called "baby-doll" nighties have been perking things up in adult bedrooms for generations, and often a variety of adolescent girl outfits appear in real-life adult sexual scripts. Some even add a childlike voice for effect, which has spilled over into popular music, such that many young female singers in recent years seem to be using the same little-girl voice.

We are not talking about pornography here, just the private sex lives of everyday people. And in any case, porn (a euphemistic, shortened form of the word) only mirrors the sexual preferences and proclivities of the public, or it wouldn't sell. Tragically, this also applies in the sex trafficking market and the world of child sexual exploitation and abuse. As with the world's oldest profession, unfortunately, it's a simple case of supply and demand. I am not here referring to the creation and sales of pornography, or what happens in the backstreets of Thailand, but what takes place in the sexual world of the average person, which is based on civilized, legal, mutually agreed upon personal preferences and choices.

If we look at sexual fetishes in the realm of pornography, the childish and even infantile references become much more specific; and, in some cases, they are downright disturbing. Many individuals and couples enjoy involving pornography as one of the ingredients in their sex lives. Even so, without using any pornography at all, millions of people employ and enjoy strong hints of childish and childlike features in their sex lives. Often there is roleplaying, sometimes involving props, as though they are starring in their own private porn flick. Whatever form it takes, all these people would vehemently deny they are sexually deviant in any way or a danger to children. They know in their hearts and minds that there is no intent or desire whatsoever to involve actual children; that it's all about the spectacle of the change in an adult loved one playing a role; and children never even come to mind. Even people who would never or could never act out such things sexually often find the very idea, just the thought of someone else doing so, a titillating notion to entertain.

Similarly, civilized people everywhere abhor violence, so we try to prevent it in ourselves and others with a moral code built into our childrearing, and laws for adults that we enact and strictly enforce. Yet violence is also something millions of people like to "play at" during sex. Even before we include the more extreme sexual preferences like bondage, sadism, and masochism, wherein some people even derive sexual pleasure from being

brought to the threshold of death right at the moment of orgasmic climax, there are many less dangerous ways people choose to involve the idea of violence in their sexual activities.

Some “like it rough”, pushing the envelope a little further than the more strait-laced. The content of sexual “dirty talk” can range from mild, playful name-calling to expressing violent thoughts and pretending to suggest violent acts that would get them arrested in any other context. One of the main reasons we require consent to engage in sex is because, beyond that consent, once the sexual wheels have been set in motion, one has entered a shared experience that is special enough to permit otherwise unacceptable thoughts, feelings, and scenarios. It’s just one of the aspects of sexuality that make it one of the most unique, versatile and treasured aspects of human experience.

Then there’s the ever-popular phenomenon of “spanking”. Here’s where it gets interesting. Those who sexually spank have managed to find a way to play at both childishness and violence amid their sexual escapades, simultaneously, with an array of variations involving elements of punishment and dominance. Again, this takes place in real life; and, therefore, it ultimately gets played out in the domain of pornography. One wonders if it is the achievement of both childish and violent play at once in the adult sexual experience that makes spanking so popular, and why these types of sexual behaviour date back to the dawn of human sexual history.

The most obvious manifestations of this phenomenon in popular music may be seen in a popular song/video by Brittany Spears. She dances in a sexually provocative way that includes clear allusions to spanking, dressed in the clothes of a little girl who would be legally too young to engage in sex, as she sings: “Hit me, Baby, one more time...” to a throbbing soft-rock beat. There is nothing subtle or nuanced about it. It’s served straight up. It is only when you are alerted to this kind of thing, and start paying attention to the phenomenon, that you begin to see just how prevalent it is in our culture. And that’s even before you start watching blatantly sexist rap videos.

A decent, civilized person who enjoys sex that involves child-like and/or violent roleplaying would probably say tell you that it makes their sex more fun. She/he would appeal to our amazing ability as human beings to hold two distinctively different positions imaginatively and rationally, even two seemingly contrary positions, in our conscious experience at the same time. It is a capacity that serves us well in areas like artistic creativity and scientific innovation. And apparently, it is also helpful in terms of libidinous arousal, sexual interaction, and sexual satisfaction among consenting adults.

In fact, this capacity for mental duality is a feature of human self-conscious thought that may be indispensable in bridging or reconciling many other pairs of ostensibly contrary human states of being and circumstance. For example, it helps us maintain a healthy work-life balance. It helps parents love and raise two or more totally different children equally and fairly. And it helps a cutting-edge professional woman stand up for herself as a human being in the face of sexist male policies and sexually offensive men, and at the same time be able to fully enjoy an open and healthy relationship as a complete woman at home with the man she loves. It allows millions of women to exercise their public right to get justifiably vocal and pro-actively involved in the #metoo movement, while exercising their private right to enjoy a soft porn fiction series like *Fifty Shades*, even toying with the idea of their own sexual submission to a dominant male. Meanwhile, her partner supports her and stands squarely behind her fight for equality and freedom from sexual harassment and abuse on the job, even as he reaches for the leather and prepares to be the 'dom' to her 'sub'.

This ability is also central to the possibility of making many difficult choices in life, whether as a female or a male, that require all the judiciousness and diplomacy we can muster. Unfortunately, it also makes possible the extreme of living two lives or maintaining two or more identities at once, but it is a dynamic feature of human thought and experience, nevertheless. It is indeed possible for people to have and even entertain thoughts they would never act on or express, for any number of reasons. It happens every day to all of us, and it has been argued that human behaviour in a civilized society consists in our ability to know which thoughts can never be voiced or acted on without suffering severe consequences.

There is a line separating what is and is not okay in a civilized world. The line is clear, and there is no excuse for not knowing when you are crossing it. In the realm of human sexuality, however, that which allows us to be civilized by not expressing or acting on socially unacceptable thoughts and feelings can be used to a completely different end – to give a degree of license and freedom inside one's sexuality to "play". And millions of civilized people everywhere would say the line is delightfully blurred in this area.

What is acceptable and unacceptable in one's sex life, and in sexually explicit adult films and photographs, is in the eye of the beholder. There is plenty of room for different personal levels of tolerance and daring within the broadly acceptable bounds of human sexual behaviour in a civilized society. Of course, at the same time, I firmly maintain that real coercion, violence

and/or children in adult sexual behaviour and sexual culture, actual flesh and blood involvement anywhere under any circumstances, is vile, deviant, and utterly unacceptable. The depiction of this is unquestionably beyond pornography – it is seriously criminal. But anything else, behind closed doors and between consenting adults, to my mind falls within the full range of civilized human sexuality and culture.

But isn't it interesting how many millions of decent, civilized people believe it to be totally acceptable, even exciting, to introduce the concepts of childishness and/or violence into the adult sexual equation by "playing" with these concepts? Given the prevalence, it is part and parcel of the normal range of human sexuality, and it has been for centuries. Exactly why it has been so popular down through the centuries, and still is, is a legitimate question with an elusive answer, and it would require a great deal more research and discussion to answer more definitively.

In any event, the phenomenon is undeniable; and as a thinker and human being, I believe it is an intriguing subject worthy of further contemplation and discussion. There may well be something valuable and useful to learn from it. I'm also concerned with exploring why, when we feel overwhelmed with love for our children or grandchildren (and our adult lovers sometimes, for that matter), we have the impulse to play at eating them! But that's another essay...

* * *

Keeping it real, I wish my readers awareness and wellness, and conclude with a short poem I wrote years ago about happiness that may be of some help.

Come Now

Are you happy?

What? Are you serious?

A hateful question.

A useless question.

No one is happy, really.
Happiness is the Great Myth.
An ideal,
and,
like all ideals,
unattainable.

We snatch mere glimpses of "happiness",
but not happiness itself.
Just a direction.
An instinctive direction.
Nothing more.

We may pursue
but we may never have.
This pursuit,
the very soul of empty promise.
Quixotic at best.
Get used to it.

Rephrasing is in order.

How unhappy are you?

Well, now that you put it like that...
Not too bad at all, thanks for asking.

* * *

A stylized signature in blue ink. The first letter 'J' is large and bold, with the name 'Jeff R. Kelland' written in a cursive script across it.