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What Games We Play
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How is it what we're taught in church, synagogue, Sunday school or kindergarten about playing nice and cooperating, being a decent person or mensch, is lost or abandoned when we play games? After an evening of cards with my extended family, I wondered what would a game be like that celebrated and rewarded the virtues we try to teach our children: alternatives to those devices - greed, deceit, betrayal and dissembling - that seem to be the cornerstones of success even in games that don't employ brute force?

Of course, force has always been the resort taken by those who mistrust the power of their words, intelligence and reason to prevail, the earlier so, the greater the failure of that trust. But force seems now to be too easy, too ready an option.

A heart-rending story in the 29 Jun 2004 issue of the Scotsman tells of the death of a mother's 19-year-old son, a soldier in the First Battalion Royal Highland Fusiliers, in Basra, Iraq, of her trying to make sense of their family's tragedy and of their government's role in it. Rose Gentle said her son, Gordon, "died in their war over oil. My son was just a bit of meat to them, just a number. They don't care about him; all they're worried about is the next election. This is not our war, and they haven't even taken up the trouble of picking up the phone and say they're sorry for our loss." His uncle added, "It's disgusting the way they've treated us; poor Gordon was just fodder to them."

There was a time when soldiers were respected and admired for 'defending their country'. But as it's evident that no national threat to defend against was present, soldiers are seen now as at best pitiable dupes, conned by venal propaganda into being enforcers, not of the national security but of those business 'interests' for which their government works.

How now does the military differ from Mafia, or strike-breaking, goons obediently enforcing their bosses' bidding? "The business of America is business!"

"Nothing personal, just business!"

Have gun; will travel! Paladins? Saladins?

Since when are the country's, the national, interests reduced to those of a business community, all too willing and eager to give others' lives for their benefit?

Not just those poor kids from West Virginia who it appears now will be hung out to dry for doing what they say they thought they'd been ordered to do. Not that what they did was in any way 'right'; but the

wages of soldiering on - ignorant, deaf, dumb, blind, unthinking obedience - are to become the fall guy for higher-ups those 'good soldiers' were
Pavloved to obey: Ring, ring; drool, drool.

A cartoon from the first Bush administration had the elephantine Republican-plutocrat commenting to George senior:

"You know if we had a truly educated electorate maybe they'd figure out who is responsible for the S&L scandals (and all the other corruption of that time)."

George I: "Ok, so we cut funding to education!" If our soldiery were brought up and trained to think for themselves, would we no longer be an off-the-charts right-wing, rogue, pariah nation in the world community, trying to force-feed 'our way of life', and death, on the rest of the planet? If only we had a military that had the guts to 'just say NO!', from top to the bottom in real time!

"If my soldiers were to begin to think, not one would remain in the ranks."
- Frederick The Great.

Seen on the back of a coed's sweatshirt as I walked to campus one recent morning:

TRAMPLE THE WEAK
HURDLE THE DEAD
FIGHT TO THE FINISH!

Who's teaching our kids this stuff? Is that the way we want them raised? Is it any wonder, maturing in such an unscrupulous environment, some grow up to behave unacceptably?

What virtues would a civilly social society inculcate in its members, young and old? Cooperation, combined intelligence, universal benefit, minimizing deprivation, independence, personal integrity, conscientious objection to immoral, illegal, unethical urges or commands? How to integrate and encourage these goals? How could one structure such a learning activity?

Perhaps it's not mathematically possible to construct such games as we know them, because winning implies excess aggregation or acquisition of something: territory, points, pennies, peanuts or profit. So great is the urge to win, even in balloting, exit polls report that voters will in the privacy of the booth forswear publically professed allegiances and vote for whom they expect to win instead of voting their consciences. We have the verb, to best, meaning to conquer, to subdue, to dominate. What is 'best' about such behavior in the civilly social sense of admirable? Were we to create a new definition of success, where everyone wins, profits or benefits from the action, could such a non-zero-sum game be constructed? Only if everyone contributes or cooperates? And where's the fun in that, so steeped are we in the competition ever to have more than others? Accumulating unnecessary excess is not the main thing, it's the only thing.

Why? In an economy of scarcity, hoarding is king. What about an economy of plenty? We nearly have that in this country, or would were what we have remotely equitably distributed; yet the result seemingly is an ever more avaricious lust to acquire unusable excess. A senior colleague once described the academic process as like unto a barnyard of dung beetles, each nudging little balls of excrement with their proboscides into a pile then climbing atop their accumulated treasure to assess who, if any, had more. "There are the haves and have-mores; I'm glad I'm one of the have-mores!" - G. W. Bush, campaign 2000.
The have-leses or have-nots don't merit consideration.

A commentator on a recent PBS' 'Now' remarked that the difference between America and the European democracies is that the Europeans' social systems are designed to provide a safety net for the most unfortunate, the least successful, members of the community, so that none falls through the cracks; in contrast American culture, like our state lotteries, ludicrously rewards the vanishingly few winners and abandons the vast underclasses to miserable oblivion. Winning becomes is not the main thing but the sine qua non, literally.

Whether militarily, economically or interpersonally, aren't there alternatives to a nation obsessive in its pursuit of pyrrhic victories, a culture littered with battered spirits, broken bodies and vanquished lives?

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