On Getting It

A friend approached me on the street the other day: "Why are there so many intelligent people out there who just don't get it?"

Good question! It's clear that 'intelligence' has no bearing on the ability of Americans to 'get' what it is about our country's sickening and appalling behavior that raises the wrath and enmity of so many others. Certainly it is not the sort of analytical, synthetic intelligence we think of IQ as measuring. If intelligence is at all relevant it must be EQ, emotional intelligence, the ability to empathize and sympathize with, relate to and put yourself in, the shoes of another, particularly of one that your social environment invites you to loathe or hate. If you don't understand what it is like to be the victim of your enmity and loathing, there is no motivation to mitigate your hostility and contempt with compassion.

"Revenge is not an option", the odious bumper sticker in my community reads; "it's a necessity!" Hell hath no fury like that mindset! What would it be like to in such a mind? Pretty unpleasant place to be, I imagine.

A correspondent sent me the URL(1) of some photos taken of the war in Iraq

(1) http://home.wi.rr.com/davef/iraq.htm

by someone who was obviously in the thick of it. "Pictures from the front", she wrote, "not for kids nor viewing during dinner hours. How GW is spending your tax dollars. Pretty graphic." Irony dripping from every pore, she added before the atrocities at Abu Ghraib were made public: "Gee, its hard to understand why they don't want us there!" Her commentary was hardly an understatement: bodies in almost ever frame, some still living, some corpses; a foot and calf severed below the knee left in the roadway, a mute testament to the silent brutality of man's intimate inhumanity to his own.

To me those photos are deeply disturbing; revolting evidence of the traumatic track we've left on Iraqi society. But how would they affect the author of the revenge-lust bumper rhetoric above? What is it like to be inside the head of such a personality? Pretty unpleasant, I imagine.

Soldiers engaged in battle see as much or worse every day. How do they desensitize themselves to the pain and agony of others, the death dealt daily upon them by others, and by them upon others? We see photos
of coalition troops weeping for their fallen cohort, but Iraqis have loved ones, too. Is there any understanding that the cavalier taking of any other's life results not only in the loss of that individual but the loss to countless others who knew or might have known the slain? How does one lose, if indeed one ever had, the sanctity of the personhood of the countless, uncounted, unknown and unknowable others?

Where does the self-absorbed narcissism arise that fuels this obliviousness to others? A persistent, flagrant fallacy of economics is that unrestrained self-interest results in advancement of the general good: Certainly not to those trod under, left in the dust, in the general stampede of advancement. But were it so, would that benefit suffice to justify the horrors perpetrated on those others who fail fully to profit from the 'general good'? Certainly unrestrained self-interest fuels the fires of grossly disparate income distributions, of gross inequities in individual opportunity and acquisition of material prosperity: great poverty alongside great wealth, shortcuts for the scions of privilege and status. Just look around you!

Do the beneficiaries of self-serving greed and privilege think they are entitled to their status? Are the rest of humanity somehow less deserving? Or is the cornering of the market in opportunity and acquisition a compulsive behavior, mitigated by their hardened insensitivity to others? 'We' are oneself and perhaps a few closest associates; all others are 'they' suitable only for exploiting, then trodding under.

I went to a wedding in a park one lovely spring morn. The praying was not for the communality of mankind, the brother- and sisterhood of us all, but thanks for the special status of the assembly: beloved, protected, entitled to expect the best, indifferent to those others, the unsaved, the unblessed, the unbelieving kaffirs. Is that the source of the difficulty?

Some species are entirely solitary apart from mating; some organize their social interactions in pairs, in bands, small groups, clans, prides, packs or tribes: group solidarity versus all those others. Has mankind not evolved beyond that? For centuries some groups of our kind have repeatedly established by their fruitful progress that cooperation is more efficient and productive organization of endeavor than murderous competition; that tolerance of diversity and welcoming differing perspectives and experience results in stronger, more effective social entities. Yet time and time again, we fall back on the old failed models of hostility toward others, hate and murderous conspiracy.

Why? In the animal world the breakdown of group transactive, cooperative interactions results in times of scarcity .. of food, of land, of sexual partners. Is that what's driving the divisions now? Perhaps.

Yet nowhere in the animal world is found the sort of degradation observed at Abu Ghraib by our soldiers of Iraqi civilians. Naughty Ostrich! After viewing the leering, smirking faces of male and female crowing over the heaped piles of nude Iraqi males, I awoke with that refrain in my mind. There's no scarcity of food, land or sexual partners
for the conquerors sufficient to explain, justify or excuse the degradation of those prisoners, or their captors, those images represent. Seymour Hersh, author of the tight expose' (2) said in

(2) "Torture at Abu Ghraib", The New Yorker, 10 May 2004, p. 42

a PBS interview 3 May 04: "We failed to protect them, the children!" He meant the ignorant military-persecutors who, he imagined culled from the hills of Appalachia, never before out of the hotbed of their familial homes and familiar prejudices, were thrust into the oven of barbarity our Iraq adventure has become. Their leadership, and ours, will surely posture and crow seeking to deflect responsibility for their failure on these children, further failing to protect them from their, and our, command's failures. Yet we failed them by our failing to educate them in the essence of humanity, of human decency, of the appropriate way to treat other humans, even those designated by our leadership "enemies".

But there are other children failed, others' children: the Iraqis. Lose not sight of the fact that most of those incarcerated in Abu Ghraib are also 'children', abused and misused by the military 'intelligence' apparatus of the invading occupiers. Many civilians plucked off the streets for ill-defined, forgotten transgressions, they have been caught up in the hellhole that is America's new definition of human indecency to other humans. Our 'need to know' supersedes theirs for treatment respectful of their humanity? Better to know the secrets of an enemy we earnestly continue to create, we propagate yet more enemies by our treatment of the formerly uncommitted. Is there any finer, more precisely eloquent illustration of counterproductive behavior?

O shame, thy name is America, O shame! We, our earnestly intransigently ignorant American compatriots, just don't get it. Any cooperation enlisted by overwhelming force and abuse doesn't work, does not persist, is a protective cloak shed by the abused when the abuser's back is turned.

"The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas, values or religion, but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do." - Samuel P. Huntington.

Perhaps it's not just organized violence but organized, bestial brutality that to our enduring shame will now and future characterize this country in the eyes and minds of the rest of the world. Innocence long lost; guilt found. For pity's sake, get it! Or so much more will be lost.