

The Riddle of Life

by Phillip W. Weiss

Recently I was talking with a friend of mine. At least I thought he was a friend or rather referred to him as such as a matter of convenience or as a euphemism for some other term that escaped my mind but would invariably come to me when I no longer needed it. Anyway, our conversation drifted to the subject of the human condition. I argued that the human condition is a product of human nature while my friend, who claimed to be a socialist, although he owns a house and is a now-retired former vice-president of a brokerage house, claimed that the human condition is a product of social forces shaped by economic factors that mold the character of each individual human being. His argument intrigued me. Social forces are anything but benign. They are dynamic, ever-changing and impossible to ignore. These social forces drive people to the brink of insanity, and often over the edge into an abyss of social dysfunctionality that, if not reversed, can and will produce pain, suffering and death. This caused me to ponder about the nature of civilization, the term we use to refer to the manner in which humans are organized to ensure their own survival. Civilization has its imperfections. Civilization includes inequities that drive people to commit crimes and go to war. So, I concluded that the problem with civilization is people. That is paradoxical in that the purpose of civilization is to ensure that people survive and prosper. Yet, instead, civilization makes people angry, hostile and suicidal. I found that

paradoxical. So then I began thinking about other paradoxes. For instance, the greater our capacity to amass data, the dumber we become. Today we have technology that enables us to collect a virtually unlimited amount of information on any subject. But instead of producing enlightenment, this incessant amassing of data creates more confusion, leaving us frustrated and more in the dark. Then another common yet hardly ever mentioned paradox is that the more we exercise the weaker we become. The medical field exhorts us to exercise as a way to stay fit and deal with disease. Yet all exercise does is remind us of our physical imperfections that exercising may conceal but cannot reverse rendering the exercising a virtual sham. Related to the exercise paradox is another paradox, that the faster we run the harder we fall. Instead of taking it slow and steady, we go rushing about and as a result trip over ourselves, make mistakes, producing disasters and death, and fail to reach our objectives. Then all the talk about the Artemis II mission reminded me of another paradox, which is that the larger the telescope the less we see. This is part of our incessant gathering of data. We have massive telescopes in space that enable us to see a billion years into the past, but without even the slightest clue of what exactly it is that we are seeing. It is information that serves no useful and immediate purpose. It doesn't even satisfy our curiosity. Then another paradox that's more in line with the human condition issue is that the stricter the law the more there is crime. This is a most perplexing paradox because the strict enforcement of law is expected to reduce crime. Instead, it creates more crime as more activities are reclassified as infractions and people try even harder to circumvent the law. Then there is a

paradox that really hits home, namely, that the cheaper the product the more expensive the upkeep. This paradox reminds me of the slogan, penny wise and pound foolish. Skimping on expenses upfront merely defers spending to a later date, for example, a cheaply made refrigerator will soon breakdown and require expensive repairs or even replacement after only limited use. Then there is, to me, the ultimate paradox, that technological advances while producing more wealth do not produce more happiness. Instead, society becomes more complex, people feel more insecure and technology becomes a threat. That is a serious paradox. I shared all these thoughts of mine with my friend who smiled and said, "Why are you trying to confuse yourself over such nonsense. Of course, there are paradoxes. What of it? Why point out the obvious? You may as well tell me that you just discovered that day follows night. Is that not a paradox too? Inherent in every human activity is its opposite. A good act can produce bad results and vice-versa. So don't waste my time with this kind of pseudo-philosophical tripe. I have better things to do than listen to you trying to impress me with insights that are as new as a worn out carpet. That's the problem with your intellectual types, you think too much. Instead of thinking, do practical work, get your hands dirty tilling the soil or building a house or taking out the garbage or joining the army and manning the forts." I thought about his comments, and then replied, "Practical work is way overrated. As I have always said, the more you work the more tired you get and the more you succeed the more you fail because in success there contains the seeds of failure and the higher you fly, the harder the crash and the snottier the skeptic, the happier the fool who thinks they know it

all.” My friend laughed and said, “We could keep this up all night and the following day, like running for miles in a circle while getting nowhere, which is a paradox, or pouring water in a tub with a hole in it or discovering the meaning of life while getting more confused in the process, for, as the wise man once said, the more we learn the more we forget. You see, I can speak in paradoxes too.”

After hearing this, I had enough. We talked a lot but said nothing, had exchanged thoughts but did not truly communicate, had tried to show each other up while tearing each other down. Is this what being human is all about? I hope not.