

Mr. California Wonders About Ignorance

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Monday, June 23, 2014

<https://curmudgeon-alley.com/mr-california-wonders-about-ignorance/>

John the Philosopher aka Mr. California asked me to comment on the following:

“Ignorance rules the unreflecting herd.”¹

Ignorance is defined by the dictionary as: *lack of knowledge, education, or awareness.*

My first thought is that this falls under the rubric of “Nothing new under the sun”. A Google search on — quotes ignorance of the masses — revealed many similar thoughts. Here are a few that I cherry picked:

“Five percent of the people think; ten percent of the people think they think; and the other eighty-five percent would rather die than think.” ~~ Thomas Edison

“It’s much easier not to know things sometimes.” ~~ Stephen Chbosky

“There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there has always been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that ‘my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge.’” ~~ Isaac Asimov

“The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.” ~~ Sir Winston Churchill

“Any formal attack on ignorance is bound to fail because the masses are always ready to defend their most precious possession – their ignorance.” ~~Hendrik Willem van Loon

And I could go on.

My next thought is that everybody (yes me too) I know thinks that they are smarter/more informed/ etc than the notorious “them” and “they” aka the vast mass of other human beings.

My third thought is that we are all ignorant about any number of things. It is indeed a wise person who knows that he can toss a stone into the well of his ignorance and never hear it hit bottom. So the question becomes in what field are the masses so ignorant, politics, religion, science or something else.

None of which makes the base assumption untrue. Most of us just want to rock along getting through life as easy as possible. Most of us do not want our base assumptions challenged. It can make life uncomfortable if they begin to crumble under your feet. That may be the reason that so many folks will not study or read outside of their comfort zone. Ignorance can bring a degree of mental peace. Is this good or bad? Sometimes I really do not know.

There is the old proverb about ignorance being bliss (see Stephen Chbosky above). Someone once asked me why I did not eat supermarket meat. I launched into a long explanation of the hormonal and chemical issues with industrial meat production. I went on to expound on animal welfare issues throughout the process. I remarked on worker issues in the huge packing houses. After listening to me without comment for a few minutes, he summarized it up to his satisfaction by saying, "Sometimes you just need to put blinders on." He then walked away blissfully munching on his hamburger.

My personal opinion is that we are not really taught to think, and in this country the trends towards this seems to be getting worse. The corporations want a work force sufficiently educated to do the tasks they want done, but not so awakened as to question the purposelessness of most of our jobs. I say purposelessness as most jobs in this country are driven by consumer spending for goods that are not really needed. I think this is why there is a big drive towards charter schools aka the privatization of the educational system. It will allow businesses to control the educational agenda more than they do now. And while I am on the subject of education, most education currently seems aimed at getting the student to pass standardized tests. Being able to fill in the correct bubble does not promote critical thinking. I dwell on critical thinking because without that facility it is hard to realize your ignorance needs to be revoked. Without some degree of critical thinking and self-awareness your ignorance probably is not an issue for you.

A percentage of us run off to college for a few years. The way I remember it though was studying hard and cramming for tests. At least as a science major I did not spend an inordinate amount of time analyzing what I was learning. I was just trying to survive and get the best grades that I could.

Finally at some point, early for some, later for others, their education is complete. "Real" life begins in earnest with making a living and family responsibilities. I think life just overwhelms us sometimes. Even if we wanted to sometimes we just do not have the time and energy to explore bigger realms. It is a lot easier to accept the status quo, to immerse yourself in activities and just do what you need to do.

My biggest problem with ignorance is not so much with the "herd", but with supposed leaders of the herd. If you are going to accept such a position in life then in my humble opinion you have a duty to educate yourself on the issues you speak on and are responsible for. One example that comes to mind is the Republican Party and climate change. Accordingly to them climate change is not a problem, and anyway the alarmist are using unsound science. Is this willful ignorance, plain vanilla ignorance, or being beholden to the money from folks and businesses involved in industries promoting the degradation of our environment? I'm going with a combination of greed that forces willful ignorance. All too many politicians base their opinions on a party platform, religious convictions or maybe a Ouija board. Many are ignorant, willfully or otherwise, of the complexity of the issues they are dealing with. That type of ignorance makes me angry.

I'm going to leave you with a couple quotes. The first by that great American philosopher, no, not Mr. California, but Frank Zappa, "*The more you can escape from how horrible things really are, the less it's going to bother you...and then, the worse things get.*"

The second is by satirist P.J. O'Rourke, "*No drug, not even alcohol, causes the fundamental ills of society. If we're looking for the source of our troubles, we shouldn't test people for drugs, we should test them for stupidity, ignorance, greed and love of power.*"

Some ignorance is basically just a choice, and all too frequently a bad choice.

Footnotes:

1. As an aside John's quote is an extension of a William Wordsworth quote, "*Habit rules the unreflecting herd.*"