

Willful Ignorance

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I've been bothered a bit recently by what I've come to think of as willful ignorance. It's not something we think about often, but we're probably all guilty of it in varying degrees. I see it in my family as well as in the world outside. My wife and I share the trait with regard to at least one item of modern life: cellular phones. While acknowledging that they can be useful, neither of us has a clue when it comes to doing anything with them other than responding to a call (I'm not even up to that when I happen to have someone else's unfamiliar phone with me) or making a call by typing in the phone number. I can't manage to respond to messages nor figure out what to do with them. What is the problem? First of all, I've spent my life using BIG conventional telephones where you could see the numbers. All you had to do with them is dial or push the numbers, or pick up the phone when it rings. Now you have to remember what button to push when it rings. The number buttons are too small to see or find easily at my age and the other functions are hard to find, harder to memorize, and complicated to program. Could I do it? Probably. I taught myself to use a computer when I decided it was something I needed and wanted to do. However I confess that I just don't want to be bothered spending a lot of time figuring out how to use a telephone when I've used a telephone all my life that required no such learning curve. Text messages? They might be useful in certain circumstances, but learning to type on a microscopic keyboard where each key represents three letters so you have to remember how many times to push the key to get the correct letter just doesn't stir my enthusiasm. I'm probably an early example of the failure of the American educational system associated with doing away with rote learning. I never became a Boy Scout because I couldn't memorize the Scout's Oath. That didn't really interest me any more than learning to send text messages. Similarly, I was a bad language student. I wanted to speak in a foreign language; I just didn't want to bother to learn the rules of grammar.

My wife's unwillingness to learn to work a cell phone carries over to computers. Although she was a good typist, she can't or won't learn to type on a computer. She's in good company. Lots of excellent writers persist in using their old typewriters and some still insist in writing by hand. They usually get away with being regarded as eccentrics. However, based on our cell phone and VCR programming skills, our children see us as pathetic relics. In turn, when my 31 year old daughter reveals surprise that people can ski in the Rocky Mountains and that these not exactly secret mountains extend from Canada to Mexico, I wonder where we went wrong in providing for her education.

Why do we have these blind spots? It may be that we're not especially gifted in some areas. Laziness surely plays a large part, but there's also an element of snobbism. At times we just don't think learning something is worth our precious time, and besides there are other people who can do those things. It's true. I

can't tune up the engine of my car or do much else to it, and there are mechanics who are perfectly capable of doing it better than I'll ever learn to. Why learn about nutrition or hygiene when there are doctors who can fix us up? Why learn to build a house or clean a floor or grow a vegetable? Others can do it, and they will. Why listen to what politicians say and do? Journalists will do it for us. The problem is that when there are too many areas which we deem unworthy of our precious time, we begin to take on an aspect of utter cluelessness. Carried a little further we become functional morons. It's not an attractive image and not one which we would consciously promote, and yet, while we may think we're on top of things, others may see us in a light we wouldn't have imagined or desired.

I didn't start this with the intention of making it a political discourse but I suppose that an essay of willfull ignorance in 2007 couldn't ignore George W. Bush. I often wonder how the most powerful democracy in the world could elect an idiot as its leader. By any reasonable measure that is what we have done. Nevertheless, George Bush did graduate from Yale and got a degree from Harvard, two of our best universities. Even taking into consideration the favorable treatment his family connections have afforded him, he couldn't have managed to overcome those obstacles and get himself into the presidency if he were clinically retarded. He also learned to fly a jet fighter plane. That may not make him an intellectual but it would seem to preclude the feeble-mindedness suggested by his every act as president. My theory is that his wilfull ignorance is of such massive scope as to render him the perfect idiot. His curiosity is negligible; his knowledge of the world, of his country, and of history less than that of a first grader.

I came to live in Italy in 1973, 34 years ago. As an American football fan and one whose junior high school gym teacher promoted the detested game of soccer, I have always had a negative feeling about soccer, or calcio (I will not call it football), and yet to live in Italy for three decades without having some rudimentary idea of who the major teams are and who is leading the league etc., is to be effectively unconscious with regard to one's surroundings. One can choose to dislike or disapprove what goes on in the world in which one lives, but to be totally unaware of it is not a healthy trait. Ignorance may be bliss, but it's the bliss of a cow, not of a human being.

We can't all know the ins and outs of every subject, and it could be suggested that an extensive knowledge of pop culture is more a sign of wasted time than an open mind, but our minds are not computers with very small hard drives, risking failure when too much material is downloaded. The human brain seems more like a muscle than a small hard drive. The more it works, the bigger it gets.

Given the preference for infotainment and simple trash of our media, it can take a conscious effort to avoid knowing which Hollywood starlets landed in the drunk tank this week or who Britney is threatening to marry. Maybe that explains what is happening in our world. People are just closing their eyes and ears to all that

noise. It certainly needs to be intelligently filtered. But how can it be that in the midst of all our communication tools, so few people in the US (and elsewhere) seem to be noticing that our Bill of Rights has been shredded and our Constitution ignored, that two presidential elections in a row have been rigged more blatantly than the one in the Ukraine that we complained about, and plans are underway for the next one; that the US, which only 60 years ago set up the Nuremberg trials and decreed that wars of aggression and the use of torture are crimes against humanity, has now adopted these techniques as standard operating procedures?

I hear people saying that politics is boring, that politicians are all alike, and therefore they're tuning out. I'm enough of a snob to wish that I was unaware of the existence of Britney or Rush Limbaugh or Lindsay Lohan, but while my hearing and my eyesight are deteriorating, I'm not yet totally oblivious of the world outside. I do manage to avoid a lot of the pop culture that fills our media sewers, but I wouldn't be a smarter or better person for my total ignorance. Ignorance, willfull or not, pays no dividend. With the current acceleration of environmental degradation, political corruption, climate change, income inequality, and the worldwide spread of disease, we need to be a bit more thoughtful about what we choose to remain ignorant about.