EPISODE 67

CRAWLING BACK UP THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

Hi there. Welcome to the beginning of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 67 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now the purpose of this episode is to drill down a little on my assertion from a couple of episodes ago that the only plausible way that complete societal breakdown can be averted, and that therefore the only way that there can be any sort of believable future is if somehow we can remake the entire world's public culture so that it could pass a PG rating.

And I'm not being a G rated Pollyanna when I call for something that, to some of you at least, might seem not only outrageous, but also completely impossible to pull off. After all, we have all grown up being assured by the powers that be that, just like time itself, the behavioral arrow can only point in one inexorable direction.

But as I've been mentioning throughout, the process of tightening up our loosened standards may indeed be difficult. But it is not impossible. And as I just went over again in the last episode, the Progressive reforms at the turn of the 20th Century are a good example of how determined reformers can, without violence or repression, bring about meaningful change for the better.

As I've also been saying throughout, though, and as I emphasized last episode, unlike reformers of times past, I am not basing my argument upon the tenets of some old time religion or upon the beliefs of some political philosophy. Rather I am calling for you to use all of the scientific findings as outlined in Episodes 39 to 45, and to then simply deduce from them what the proper behavioral parameters for humanity should be.

And for right now I'd like for you to specifically remember the overwhelming amount of evidence that the 'blank slate' idea, which ruled the social sciences in the middle of the 20th Century—namely, the idea that our personalities, social constructs, etc., are totally a function of our environment, and that therefore are more or less infinitely malleable, that idea is absolutely wrong. That instead we arrive on this planet pre-programmed, as it were, with all sorts of attitudes and behaviors. That much, if not most, of this pre-programming is a result of millions of years of evolution which have been

slowly weeding out those traits not conducive to hypersocial living, and accentuating those traits which are. That therefore these traits are literally in our DNA. And that therefore fifty or a hundred or even two hundred years of believing some ideology which denies such traits, or that even getting an entire world to believe in such an ideology, really means so much squat.

In other words, ideology might well trump common sense. It might well trump common experience. But ideology is never going to trump DNA.

And while we're at it, it's probably a good idea to once more point out that you should be very careful in your understanding as to how wide the actual behavioral parameters have been in other cultures and societies throughout history. After all, it should go without saying that fictional accounts of this place or that time rarely line up with what actually was going on. And further, anecdotal stories about how some of the very privileged few in a culture behaved tell us next to nothing about the day to day lives of the vast majority of the population in any given culture.

Let's take the first point first. Now ever since the gangster movies which first appeared in the early Thirties, our popular culture—novels, televisions shows, movies—has been super saturated with ever increasing depictions of extreme violence. I mean, even when I was a young kid back in the supposedly innocent Fifties, I watched an endless series of Westerns, in which every half hour at least one or two bad guys were killed.

So that, assuming that there is a future, if all someone in the future had to judge our culture by were TV shows and movies, they might well infer that each and every one of us had to strap on iron each and every time we went out to the Quickee Mart. But of course the reality is that the vast majority of us spend our entire lives being completely safe and secure. And it is more than obvious that in reality we couldn't begin to live our ordinary day to day lives if there really were as many bad guys and shoot outs as there are in the movies.

Likewise, the fact that even famous late Medieval works, such as 'The Canterbury Tales' and 'The Decameron', have some overly racy elements to them doesn't for a moment mean that everyday life back then was remotely like the scenes and characters depicted. In fact, throughout history one of the hallmarks of fiction was that it portrayed behaviors which no 'right thinking' person would ever conceive of actually doing. And that's precisely why fiction was interesting and exciting.

And as for mistaking anecdotes for reality: As you'll remember from my little survey of Rome back in Episode 14, weird sadistic emperors like Nero and Caligula did indeed exist. And gladiators

did indeed fight to the death in the Coliseum. But the era of insane emperors was a short blip in the two thousand year long history of Rome. And in reality the only way that an empire of upwards of eighty million people could be held together for literally centuries was not through gory combat, but rather through a system of laws, which were perceived by the population to be both fair and justly applied.

'Well,' you may be thinking, especially if you know anything about the place, 'What about Japan? Until very recently its manga comic books—which you could buy in any convenience store—showed adult men having sex with underage girls.   What's more, Japan is notorious for its ultra-violent manga and anime cartoons. Yet it is also one of the most crime free, well behaved countries on Earth.'

What people don't understand when they make this point, however, is that Japan is also, famously, crushingly conformist. So that those people who do partake of these particular fantasies are prevented from acting upon them by overwhelming social pressure. And it is also important to note that in World War II those nice, polite Japanese civilians, now that they were soldiers in conquered Asian countries, and freed from the enforced conformity of the home islands, quickly and truly degenerated into being those inhuman brutes as portrayed in our World War II movies. (And if you don't believe me, then ask any Filipino who was there.)

Speaking of World War II, though, perhaps you are already aware of the fact that during that war (and, actually, also during previous wars) only around 20% of front line soldiers ever fired their guns at the enemy. And that this was a finding that was also replicated in studies of both British and Russian soldiers. Something about humans not wanting to kill other humans. And perhaps you are also aware that by Vietnam up to 95% of soldiers were only too happy to fire away.

Now this change is usually explained by pointing out the extra effort made by the Army after World War II to dehumanize one's opponent during basic training. But one might also add that the World War II soldiers grew up watching movies where the most violent action was usually fist fights. Whereas by the late Sixties those Westerns that I had seen ten years earlier had morphed into far darker affairs, with the typical James Bond movie showing ever more brutal deaths, and having body counts of easily a hundred or more.

And by the time of Iraq? Not only were there all those violent video games that the kids had grown up with, but war itself, what with murderous drones being controlled from television screens thousands of miles away, had become a video game, also.

So, what with all of this real life evidence, along with the common sense understanding that 'as you think, so you become', one would think that today there would be no confusion as to the causal relationship between violent fantasies and violent behavior. Especially when the American Psychological Association, 121,000 members strong, and very few among them being nuns and priests, states unequivocally that (quote) 'exposure to media violence is a significant risk factor for aggressive and violent behavior'.

Yes, you would think. But instead one still finds many otherwise serious writers and pundits continuing to ponderously and endlessly repeat the complete untruth that there is no real scientific proof that this is the case.

So why is that?

May I suggest again that this is, once again, totally a function of ideology. After all, Liberal Democracy/Utilitarianism is based upon the assumption that, so long as no one physically hurts another, all fantasies are benign. Now also remember that, in the absence of qualities, then quantities are all that matter. Which means that very soon intensity becomes all that matters. Which means that the most intense experience will always win out in the marketplace of fantasies. Which means that in a true Liberal Democracy it will be extremely difficult for people not to become addicted to violent fantasies. Which means that the true believer in Liberal Democracy will do anything to suppress the plain scientific truth that in reality violent fantasies do indeed lead to violent behavior. For to not suppress that then blows the whole trip.

Which in a not so round about way is why we now have ISIS.

And, yes, I know that that sounds like a pretty outrageous leap. But let me explain.

You see, ISIS never had anything to do with Islam. I mean, I've been to around 35 different Muslim countries. And traditionally they as a group have always been among the most peaceful, law abiding societies on this planet. But ISIS never recruited among traditional peoples. No, the vast majority of the people who joined up were from the West and from notionally Muslim places such as Western China or Chechnya. And they all had access both to the internet and to ultra-violent video games.

And I would guess that you are familiar with the relatively recently coined word 'cosplay'. This is what happens when someone, say, dresses up like Batman and goes to a Comic Con conference. So what I would suggest is that what those ISIS recruits were doing was taking cosplay one step further: They were dressing up as Medieval Islamic terrorists, and acting out their video game fantasies for real. Which meant that they saw their victims as nothing more than three dimensional versions of the countless anonymous characters which they had been killing for years in all of those video games.

They were living the dream.

And when it came time for they themselves to die? They didn't care. Not because they considered themselves to be religious martyrs, sacrificing themselves for some noble cause. No, rather it was because they, too, were no longer real humans. Just characters in a video game. And now it was game over.

And if that doesn't disturb you as to the results of what our culture has produced (and, yes, it's our culture. After all, those violent video games weren't invented in Senegal or Yemen), if that doesn't disturb you, then consider 9/11.

Now back when that first happened what bothered me the most was how anyone could be so sick as to fly innocent passengers on planes into the sides of buildings. After all, having been to Arab countries, and having seen how much simpler and straightforward their cultures were than ours, I just couldn't believe that such mentalities could even come up with such a twisted idea. Then someone I knew pointed out that all they were doing was following the plot line of a best selling Tom Clancy novel.

So our society had rewarded Tom Clancy to the tune of millions of dollars for having come up with such an ugly idea. Hey: That's entertainment! But then we reacted with shock and horror when other people simply acted it out. I mean, obviously actually doing something evil is worse than just thinking or writing about it. But no one got rich in the 1920's writing a best selling novel outlining in detail how you could efficiently kill millions of people through the industrial use of poison gas ovens. And if they had done that then they, too, would have probably been tried at Nuremberg along with the Nazis.

But most of us probably can't even see the connection any more. That's what it's come down to.

So let's go back to the Roman Empire and those gladiator fights to the death in the Coliseum. Because it has always shocked us how supposedly civilized spectators back then could have gotten off

on watching killing and death going on as entertainment right in front of their eyes. And, again, I am well aware of the difference between reality and fantasy. But in certain crucial and significant ways, my brain isn't. And neither is yours. What's more, in a typical week of watching Netflix, etc., our brains see significantly more realistically portrayed murders and deaths than the typical Roman citizen's brain might have seen in a lifetime.

And just as someone who hunts for his food can argue that we non-hunters are the hypocrites, because we wouldn't dream of harming an animal ourselves, and yet we gladly eat meat, so, too, could that Roman citizen argue that in watching real combat and death he was actually being much more honest than those of us who are, say, against capital punishment, but who then gorge ourselves on endless depictions of people getting killed.

As I said, though, most of us probably can't even make such a connection any more.

Anyway, leaving that pleasant subject for a bit, I would now like to make a point about being catholic.

No, not the religion. Rather I am talking about the original meaning of the word, which (more or less) is: to be universal, all embracing, inclusive. And the reason why the Catholic Church calls itself that is because it has always considered itself to be a church which should include each and every member of a society, country, or culture, irrespective of anyone's particular level of interest in or commitment to the religious life.

You see, if one happens to be running a religion, there are two distinctively different paths which any religion can follow. On the one hand, the religion can be for 'members only'. That is to say, its rules and practices can be tailored for only those people who are of such a temperament where their spiritual commitment is by far the most important aspect of their lives. An example of such an outlook were the Puritans. And just as someone who wants to be a professional athlete will submit themselves to far more physical regimen and discipline than will a normal person, so, too, did the Puritans willingly embrace a level of behavioral constraints that most of us would find way too strict.

But the Catholic Church, because it saw itself as a church for the entire world, approached the problem from the opposite direction. After all, the vast majority of humans do not see the spiritual life as the be all and end all of their existence. So the Catholic Church created a set of rules and regulations which more or less covered the bare minimum of what someone needed to do in order to be a member

in good standing, as it were. Don't do obviously horrible things like murder or adultery. Attend mass. Say the rosary. Go to confession when the inevitable sins have occurred.

Now for those who did have a natural affinity for the religious life, there were nunneries and monasteries which they could join. And, as the system developed and got more sophisticated, those who wanted to spend their lives serving the poor could become Franciscans. And those who wanted to devote their lives to intellectually understanding God could become Jesuits. And so on. But for most normal human beings, so long as you did that minimum and you were a good Catholic, then you were pretty much free to live the rest of your life as a normal human being. Raising a family, celebrating holidays, having a livelihood, maybe accumulating a certain amount of status or wealth.

And, being catholic and all inclusive, as a result throughout most of history the Church in practice was pretty tolerant of human foibles and failings. Usually much more so than the Protestants who came afterwards, who often were far closer to the Puritans in their outlook on the human condition. And this is why, to use a trivial example, in modern times, even though the Church was dead set against gambling, priests would have bingo nights in their parish halls. After all, it was thought, it was far better to let people have some more or less harmless fun playing bingo than having them end up in Las Vegas.

But I don't want to get sidetracked here into a discussion of the relative merits of different religious outlooks. Rather I am trying to make an analogy to our current problem of how to get the entire world to ever so slowly claw its way back up the slippery slope of total crap down which it has so quickly, and so decisively, descended.

Because whatever behavioral and entertainment parameters we end up with, they're going to have to apply to the entire world. And that's because, unless they are subject to something like China's internet Great Firewall, every single person in every end of the road small village in the entire friggin' world already has access to all of those ISIS beheading videos, and all of that viciously degraded pornography, that you also have access to. And although you (in theory at least) have all of those mental filters in place, and all of that learned ability to separate fantasy from reality, they don't. So that if you really believe that we are all citizens of one world, and it's not just some feel good performative B.S. on your part, then you're going to have to understand that we all, all seven billion of us, are going to have to be held to that same PG standard.

And, really, I'm not all that sure that humanity in general is even ready to be able to handle a PG rating. But we should at least start by aiming for that.

Although this reminds me of something from the last episode, which I perhaps didn't stress enough. And that is that we also need to sort of have a PG rating in economic terms.

And what does that mean? It means that, completely contrary to Utilitarianism or the classical Economics which derived from it, humans don't measure poverty or wealth in absolute terms. Rather, behavioral economics has found over and over again, in every society, that a sense of being poor or rich is always relative. That is to say, that if you take the average income in a society, then people who are making less than half of that average consider themselves poor. And people who are making twice the average consider themselves well off. Thus someone who makes, say, $20,000 in a Third World country considers themselves upper class. Whereas someone who makes $20,000 in the United States, even if objectively speaking their car, television, etc., are all of higher quality than that of the first person, that someone still considers themselves poor.

Now hopefully you'll also remember how back in the Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas wrote that there was such a thing as a 'fair price', and that people were therefore very sensitive as to the maintenance of that fair price. That classical Economics laughed at this idea, and taught that any price established by the marketplace was by definition fair. And that modern behavioral economics has found that classical Economics was actually dead wrong, and that in reality people actually are finely attuned to what is 'fair' and what is not.

And what that means in practice is that regular people might well agree that their boss, who works a lot more each day and has far more responsibility than they do, does deserve a salary ten times theirs. But if he makes a hundred times more, then behavioral economics says that they are going to feel ripped off. And you might well feel virtuous and self satisfied that you're driving an all electric Mercedes that causes zero pollution. But all that the Third World person is going to see is you driving a Mercedes. So that they're not going to listen at all to you when you lecture them about climate change.

And we're back to the critical point that if you want other people to change, then it's pretty much up to you to first set the example.

And there's another reason why we need that worldwide PG rating. Because remember the Pine Ridge Reservation, and how, no matter how much the elders wanted to prohibit alcohol, and no matter

how much most of the tribal members, in their sober moments, hated alcohol, still, if all you had to do was drive two miles to the Nebraska border and get all the alcohol you wanted, then that's what ended up happening. And it's great that progress has progressed to the extent that you or I can with relative ease hop on a plane and go anywhere. At the same time, though, this means that you or I can also hop on a plane and go to Southeast Asia and buy some sex tourism with young boys and girls. Or whatever.

I mean, if your common experience hadn't taught you this already, then Episode 44 pretty clearly explained why, even though our minds are fully capable of being rational, that's usually not how we make our decisions. And whenever you have substances, physical or cultural, which short circuit your dopamine reward circuits, then you can pretty much throw rationality out the window.

Which brings us to the P part of the PG. Because, let's face it, each of us has gone through those times in our lives, or even if they are just moments in our lives, when, no matter how old we were and no matter how many advanced degrees we possessed, we would have been much better off if we had heeded the advice of some parental figure. And let's be real: The more that *they,* using, for instance, Artificial Intelligence, can come up with ever cleverer ways to play around with those dopamine reward circuits, the more critical it will be for us to have that Parental Guidance to shelter behind.

Anyway, so let's say that I've sufficiently convinced you, and that you are on board with the need to dial back all of the cultural junk. And we can quibble about whether the final cultural rating should be PG, or should be taken back all the way to G. Or maybe that we can afford to be looser, and go up to at least PG-13. Or maybe you want to be really 'liberal', and allow R. But at the least you agree that we've got to dial it back from the XXX that has fast become the norm. Anyway, that still doesn't answer the question as to how we're going to do this.

Before we get to that interesting problem, though, it would probably be a good idea to remind ourselves of a few more points. First of all, let's remember that the way our hypersocial nature works is that we literally can't exist without social norms. So that in the absence of traditional social norms, then new social norms will more or less spontaneously generate. And these new social norms, as in Political Correctness, won't necessarily make any logical sense or gibe with our naturally occurring human nature.

What's more, we need to remember that, somewhat relatedly, in the absence of adult supervision, then in effect the children will rule.

Finally, we need to keep in mind that point about being catholic. We can't expect everyone in the world to approach the process of dialing back with the same level of enthusiasm or discipline. What's more, all work and no play has always been a recipe for disaster. Further, the plain fact, especially in the post-industrial world to which we are all heading, is that most all of us are going to have way more leisure time than most humans have ever had throughout history. So that in coming up with new standards which take us back from the brink of negative, degraded culture, we still need to leave enough slack so as to encompass a wide variety of good, clean fun.

But how to define the limits of good, clean fun? And who exactly is going to be setting these new, improved standards of parental guidance? Now that admittedly is a tough one. After all, a lifetime of co-optation has pretty much guaranteed for us that it is our second nature to assume that anyone setting any standards of any kind is going to of course be some kind of Nazi, Spanish Inquisitor, or other type of totalitarian. Of course, it never occurs to us that the people who have told us never to accept any limits in our consumption of things or pleasures are the exact same ones who are doing their utmost to have us consume without limit whatever things and pleasures that they themselves are selling.

But our only choices in life don't have to be limited to either watching snuff films, or alternately watching endless episodes of Barney the Dinosaur. Because, believe it or not, it is possible to have a rich cultural life even if snuff films, ISIS beheading videos, and all other gory, pointless violence are censored.

Censorship? No, you can't do that! Now you're really infringing upon sacred rights! Why, Freedom of Speech is right there in the Constitution!

Except that, as I've already pointed out in an earlier episode, actually it's not. The idea that anything short of yelling 'Fire' in a crowded theater is free speech was invented around the year 1900, by jurists such as Louis Brandeis and Oliver Wendell Holmes. And no Founding Father would have remotely agreed with such a definition. Further, if you agree that snuff films should be illegal, or that child pornography should be illegal, or even if you just agree that crack cocaine shouldn't be available for sale at the Quickee Mart, then guess what? You're already in favor of censorship. You're already in favor of Authority laying down the rules. So that the argument now becomes solely where exactly the line should be drawn.

And I've already noted in an earlier episode that in a truly free and fair election where every single person in the world had a vote, then the behavioral parameters which would be agreed upon would no doubt be far stricter than what the Western World has grown used to. So that those Progressives who are always bemoaning the fact of rich Westerners deciding the fate of the rest of the world should be careful for what they wish for.

In reality, of course, such an election is not going to happen any time soon. So that, fortunately for me, I don't have to give you my final answer right now. Nor, to be honest, without that input from the rest of the world, do I currently have that final answer.

But I do know what successful mediators and arbitrators have found to be true time and again. Namely, that if you ever so slowly chip away at the edges of a dispute, then it is often relatively easy to find common ground. That is to say, if you take a question such as nudity in movies, you will have some traditionalists who want none of it. You will have some libertarians who will keep yelling 'freedom of speech'. Then you will also have some in the middle who would approve of nudity if it served some artistic purpose, but disapprove if it is entirely pornographic. So that would be a tough dispute to settle.

But if you start by dealing with those ISIS beheading videos, you will generally find broad agreement that these are socially and culturally destructive. And once you get most people to agree that things like that should be banned, then as a matter of hypersocial psychology, both traditionalists and libertarians will start to move towards the middle on other questions.

Because let me remind you of one other insight from an earlier episode. Namely, that the behavioral algorithm should never be, If it feels good, do it. Instead it should always be, If it feels good after you do it, then do it. After all, to take a few obvious examples, not many people feel all that good after they've gotten stinking drunk or spent a week coked up or just lost thousands of dollars gambling, or just masturbated to degraded pornography. I'm sorry, but they don't.

Now: All of the preceding is more or less the long term outlook. And in the long term, at some point what we might term political action will probably be required. For now, though, let's be realistic. For right now, the best that you and I can work towards is more or less 'proof of concept'. Although the good news in this is that once there is a real change in attitude, then the rest should be pretty straightforward.

So let's go back to that analogy with whole wheat bread. Because nobody started some political action committee, or tried to pass a referendum, to legislate the consumption of whole grains.   Instead what happened is that a whole bunch of individuals independently decided that they were tired of putting insipid junk into their bodies, and started making small but concrete steps towards improving their diet as a means of improving their physical health. And the marketplace followed.

Which means that right here and right now you and I can start making a commitment to stop putting insipid junk into our minds. And I am most definitely including 'me' with 'you'. Because I am only too aware of how I've cheapened myself over the decades by not only wasting my time, but also coursening my mind, lowering my standards, and dulling my sensibilities with all of the supposed 'entertainment' which I seem to endlessly allow to enter my brain.

So that's got to stop. If I ever even want to have an honest vision of a promised land, then I have to somehow regain my mental virginity, as it were.

Although I also know from past experience that cold turkey hardly ever works. Because, since I don't live in an ashram, I am always going to be bombarded by the same world of consumerism, those same well orchestrated dopamine feedback loops, that so far is a permanent feature of this postmodern world..

But if not cold turkey, here's what I can do. I don't have to watch those dumb 'action' movies with heads exploding all the time. I don't have to watch supposed comedies with all of the potty mouth humor. I don't have to watch endless sexual titillation and pointless obligatory sex scenes. I mean, I don't have to do any of that stuff.

And neither do you.

That's right. You and I are going to have to prove to the rest of the world that it is indeed possible to have a fulfilling life without submitting ourselves to the slavery of dumb degradation and those endless dopamine feedback loop addictions. That we can somehow survive with all of those screens turned off. That the sun in the morning and the moon at night, not to mention each and every other part of the natural world, are all miracle enough to sustain us.

And I'm dead serious. About how this is all up to me. And to you. To produce that proof of concept.

And if we can't, then it's better to know that now. To stop pretending otherwise. And just put those proverbial guns to our heads.

And what if you're already leading a life of relative purity? What if you've already, as it were, cut the cables? What if you're already a far better person than I? Well, there's still probably room to improve. There are still outlooks which will probably have to change. And so you can still look forward to next time. Because that's when I'll get into a subject which is really going to put me firmly outside of the mainstream of this postmodern world.

But that is for next time. For this time, as always, once again it is time once again to thank you so much for so far having listened.