

The Prairie Chicken and the Mercenary

The quixotic quest I've been on since age sixteen thanks to Asimov's robot stories is to see into the Mind of God you might say. I think that people might not be aware of this because I don't remark on it unless asked, and that doesn't happen much since I don't often engage those who might ask it. And so it has been the case for ensuing decades that I've been going after a Holy Grail of sorts (huh, another religious symbolism). And I've actually done some of this stuff; there's evidence! Not as much as I hoped, but not too shabby.

As a run up to the quest, I decided to study psychology and anthropology in college, there unwittingly confirming what I think are universal suspicions about human nature and leaving me henceforth with a certain uneasiness about being a member of Homo sapiens. For example, in more than six decades of life I can't recall a single verifiably "well adjusted" individual, including myself. That's kind of shocking when I think I've never encountered an animal outside of a couple of demented guinea pigs who wasn't well adjusted.

After that I picked up a trick or two (how well Tyrion Lannister said it: "I drink and I know things") that appealed to the corporate world, and being in need of sustenance for self, kin, and animal entourages, I've signed up for various stints in the working world. Almost all of these have taken place in boxy buildings at the termini of commutes of various lengths and within which are desks, chairs, computers, garish overhead lighting, horrid coffee, the whole scene. I'm really a mercenary with software Kung Fu. Instead of courage and boldness, software demands patience and persistence. I'm pretty good at it. I've learned a lot too. And like the plumber you call to get those pipes singing, I take great pride in my work. And I do my share of crappy jobs trudgingly well.

Sitting in cube farms and more so these days open work spaces are those who are not mercenaries or who do a great job pretending to not be. Everywhere there is what I think of as [The Prairie Chicken Dance](#) (PCD) that people do to identify and fuse themselves to the collective. Real prairie chicken males bang their dances out with great precision and gusto under the critical gaze of the female. Their reproductive success depends on it.

PCDs take various forms and are not exclusive to the corporate world, but the corporate world has this sort of global PCD that pervades and over-arches it. Here's an example. A certain software company beats a vastly superior competing product by jumping quickly into the fray when its inferior software breaks, something its competitor by definition rarely needs to do, and the hand-holding and face-fanning are enough to ensure subsequent contractual relationships. The dance mesmerizes the customer as surely as any female prairie chicken.

At this point I realize the necessity for the PCD, as I realize that's who we are as human beings. Evolutionary psychologists call these behavior patterns [hyper prosocial](#), which humans do way better than any other species and which mold us into such an inferno of productive organization that can put up a barn in a single day. It has also gouged huge chunks out of the earth, e.g. almost wiped out wolves in the continental U.S., even ones that were far far away from threatening anyone or anything, and this as a result of bureaucratic policies instituted by people who wouldn't know a wolf from a smurf. I'm

hopeful that recent generations seem to be letting up on the gas there.

If you are taking a placebo for a condition it really screws things up to know about it. That's what it is like to be doing the Prairie Chicken Dance and realize it. As much as you can rationalize its importance, part of you knows about the arbitrary and primal nature of it, and that takes some of the stuffing out of it. It isn't cynicism, you just can't get your head down and get into it like some others can. Just having a meta-humor about it helps, as I'm sure it helps theatrical performers before going on stage with a smile and a shoeshine for the umpteenth time, but it can't match the zealous energy of the true believer.

There are advantages though. Rituals tend to get untethered and drift into "[The Emperor's New Clothes](#)" realm easily, so it is good to have fresh eyes on what is happening. Of course you risk the wrath of the righteous but the manner of taking exception is an art in itself entwined with the art of survival. Voices from Swift to South Park have managed this, although they do tend to take the stuffing out of things.