
JOHN REMBER

Consensus and Other Realities

I

I've been reading R.D. Laing again, mostly when I wake up at 3am and worry about how long it will be before Social Contract Capitulation. That's when people sliding toward the bottom of the human pyramid give up, cash out their remaining retirement funds, use them to buy an assault rifle and a cookbook and start researching how to field dress their neighbour's Bichon Frise.

Worrying about pyramids also causes me to worry that, if the American Federal Reserve ever loses its ability to prop up the economy, the largest employer in America will not be the Federal Government but Amway Corporation. That might not be all bad if you've correctly timed your entry into the Amway family. Amway can't really lay you off once they've sent you a pallet of household detergent and cosmetics, especially if you've taken the time to hide it all in a safe place.

Unsold Amway products will form the nucleus of a new barter economy, which is how goods and services will be distributed after global capitalism finishes making like oil-eating bacteria. As the oil economy starts winding down, your regional Amway dealer will send you a railcar full of unsold diesel pickups to distribute to your friends and family, one tier down the pyramid. You'll be able to trade them for food just as soon as folks learn how to fashion crossbows from leaf-springs.

One of the most valuable things you can have in a world where the Social Contract has broken down is a good place to hide stuff. The Swiss have known this for years. Their best customers reached Social Contract Capitulation long ago. But in a good way.

It's thinking like this that wakes me up when it's dark outside and going to stay dark for another four hours.

2

So I turn on a reading lamp, and pick up R.D. Laing. Laing isn't an economics pundit. He's a British psychiatrist, a dead one, except at 4am on dark winter mornings, when he comes back to life, sheeted and gibbering.

One of Laing's foundational ideas is that we humans create false selves to satisfy the demands of family and culture. But a false self, and the story we tell about it, alienates us not just from our real self but from the natural world and from other people and their real selves.

Laing says that this process of creating a false self makes us alienated to the point of psychosis. Bad craziness begins when we start to think our false self is our real self, and that the story we've made up about it is true. We starve our authentic self to feed the false one. We forgo an authentic world and authentic relationships to live in ones that we've constructed out of wishes and lies and projection.

It happens no matter how smart you are. In fact, a side-effect of being highly intelligent is that your false self and made-up world are better and less subject to breakdown than the false selves and made-up worlds of people less intelligent than you. If you're of genius-level intelligence, your false self is likely to be smarter than any other false self you encounter. In philosophical terms, this is known as winning the booby prize.

You seldom glimpse your false self when you look in the mirror, but you can see it when it happens to other people. For example, Ernest Hemingway spent his life constructing a writer's self and its accompanying story about a wounded guy who never complained. When self and story broke down under the pressures of age and alcohol, there was nothing left to sustain his real self, and no real self left to sustain. His shotgun merely provided punctuation for a sentence already complete.

While R.D. Laing is concerned with individuals driven crazy by their false selves, the current economic and ecological crisis makes it obvious that technological civilisation also has a false self and a false story to back it up. For fifty years now, we have been telling ourselves that we're richer than we are, that we can steal from unborn great-grandchildren, that we stand for the noble cause of human freedom, that our economic system isn't subject to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, that we're mining and consuming inexhaustible resources according to their highest and best use.

Our real story is different, because our real self spends more than it makes. It approves the torture of detainees. It investigates the geology of countries

before it invades them, because it has wasted most of its oil. It tolerates the manipulation of markets and tax codes that result in the working poor, who aren't free, and the idle rich, who lack the sort of purpose in their lives that would allow them to do something constructive with their relative freedom. It turns its gaze away from observable phenomena when they contradict projections of economic growth and technological triumph.

Laing would say we're in the process of discovering that we're nuts. Hard facts are beginning to destroy the myths we've lived by. When George W. Bush called the American Constitution just a piece of paper, and America's Supreme Court proved him right, American civilisation took a giant step toward reality. Another giant step came when America's military got away with violating the Geneva Conventions. Another came when American politicians enacted more tax cuts and higher spending, which means we've realised that in an inflationary economy wealth is debt, and debt is wealth.

We've reached Capitulation Level with our cultural story. We've stopped believing in things we cannot touch or see, and a bleak, pragmatic survivalism has taken hold, even in that Font of Narrative called the Oval Office.

It's a good thing, because it's the start of sanity. But sanity is an inhospitable environment for American civilisation. It's an inhospitable environment for any civilisation.

3

One of my best writing students ever was a 7th-grader named Darrel. I forget Darrel's family name, but that doesn't matter, because Darrel is the author of the Frank-And-Dave Stories, and that is accomplishment enough to let him go through life single-named, like Madonna or Cher or Eminem. Frank-and-Dave Stories had titles like *Frank and Dave Go Fishing and Catch a Fish*, or *Frank and Dave Push the Explorer Back onto Its Wheels, Change the Tyre and Get Back on the Road*, or *Frank and Dave Watch the Superbowl and Their Team Wins*.

When a Frank-and-Dave Story fulfilled the promise of its title, it was over. There wasn't a lot of conflict in these stories, but they all got to where they said they would go. Frank and Dave weren't complex and interesting literary characters, but they liked each other and helped each other out when the fish stopped biting, or a tyre blew, or the opposing team was up by two touchdowns at the half. Good things happened in a Frank-and-Dave story, and

they happened in short, simple sentences full of concrete nouns and action verbs. One of the lectures I used to give the students in my graduate-level creative writing classes was called *How to Write Like Darrel*.

But Darrel's greatest asset as a writer was not his simple, clear, and effective language. It was his intact world. Darrel's parents had raised him in a disciplined but loving environment. They had seen him through the usual challenges of childhood. They celebrated his successes and when he failed, they reassured him that he would do better next year, and then they analysed his failure and actively prepared him to succeed. They set consistent and age-appropriate rules and when Darrel followed them they lovingly rewarded him and when he disobeyed them they lovingly punished him. If Darrel misbehaved in class I had only to mention that misbehaviour in a parent-teacher conference and it never happened again.

The world that Darrel lived in was defined by the story his parents told themselves about their own lives, which had them living in a world where it was possible to make a lot of money in the stock market and then retire in their forties to a ski resort and raise a child in a rational and loving way. When Darrel sat down to write a Frank-and-Dave Story, he was telling yet another version of his life story, where success was always the punch-line.

Reading a Frank-and-Dave Story did not make me wish for more action or that a really serious bad guy would show up or that the wrong team would lose the big game. Instead, it allowed me to visit a completely safe and grammatical world and to want to get back to that world whenever Darrel finished his next story. I gave Darrel an A in 7th grade English.

If you're wondering when I'm going to tell you that Darrel's parents went through divorce and bankruptcy and addiction and criminal prosecution for duct-taping Darrel to the wall on club nights, or that Darrel ultimately responded to his loving-but-overcontrolled upbringing by mowing down a kindergarten class with an AK-47, that's your worldview making assumptions about my worldview.

As far as I know, Darrel turned out all right, even if he didn't continue as a writer. And his parents lived to a ripe old age with their marriage and story intact. They died believing in their story, which isn't the worst way to go.

4

The stories that define life's parameters are called meta-narratives by people whose false selves look like philosophers. Meta-narratives define the world and the purpose of living and how time works and what wealth is for and where we've been and where we're going, among other things.

The End of Civilisation is a meta-narrative. So are Utopia and Ecotopia, stories in which humans have learned to Live In Peace With Human Nature and With Their Planet. So is Laissez-Faire Capitalism, where The Market Will Make You Free, and Marxism, where History Will Make You Free, and Christianity, where Christ's Passion Has Washed Away Your Sins. Technofuturists believe that The Singularity Will Make You Free Except That You'll Have To Live In A Hard Drive.

A distinguishing characteristic of meta-narratives is their susceptibility to capitalisation.

Meta-narratives can look a little silly when presented this way, but if yours or mine malfunctions, we're in what is called, in philosophical terms, deep shit. R. D. Laing says schizophrenia occurs when a family's or culture's meta-narrative contains enough contradictions that the individuals embedded in it stop believing in it.

2011 sees us surrounded by meta-narratives that are no longer doing their work of keeping us sane. If I had titled this essay *Free Energy From The Peaceful Atom* or *Get Rich Flipping Houses*, or *Work Hard And Save Your Money And Prosper*, I wouldn't have given much help to your false self in its struggle to maintain the illusion of its existence.

Instead, you would have retreated into a less absurd meta-narrative, which might go something like *The Marauding Hordes Won't Make It Through My Minefield* and *Get My Krugerrands*, which preserves your false self in the same way you preserve a bushel of peaches: First you kill all the bacteria, and then you seal yourself away from further contamination.

5

The usual response when a meta-narrative breaks is to go through an uncomfortable period of wondering if you have a self at all and then lie like crazy to get things back to where they were before the break, as when a fundamentalist Christian looks at a fossil and declares it an invention of Satan.

Conservatives who insist that the free market doesn't contain the seeds of its own destruction are doing the same thing, as are liberals who insist that entitlement programmes – including the one that supports the Pentagon – haven't bankrupted America.

My own meta-narrative, which is in need of repair on a number of fronts, is that Brilliant Writers Always Become Rich and Famous.

It's hard to experience the breakdown of your meta-narrative as anything but violence to your false self and your family and your community, and such perceived violence begets more violence, usually in the form of scapegoating. New meta-narratives can be forged out of the scrap of broken ones, and there's always a low-life demagogue out there forging one from the basest, nastiest, ugliest, most fearful and least sane parts of the human psyche. The reason those demagogues prosper is that the story they offer is better than nothing, which is what the false self is in the absence of a good story. For people who have butchered their real selves to feed their false selves, the choice is simple enough: Buy into this cheap-ass fiction or wink into non-existence.

6

R.D. Laing has a wonderful experiment that demonstrates how threatened we can get about the boundary we've erected to preserve our false self from the world. Anybody can perform it:

- 1] Swallow the saliva in your mouth.
- 2] Sip water from a glass and swallow it.
- 3] Spit in the glass, and then sip from the glass and swallow.
- 4] Sip water from the glass, spit it back into the glass, sip from the glass again and swallow.

Laing points out that we can handle the first two, but that three and four cause great anxiety even though they are only variations on the first two.

Our anxiety stems from confusion about what's inside and what's outside, and the sudden consequent knowledge that the boundary of the false self is both arbitrary and permeable, and always in danger of collapse due to an encounter with the real world. For the false self, authenticity is contamination. So things that cross the false self boundary need to conform to rigorous standards of purity. For these reasons, most of us have hard rules about what we put into or take out of our mouths, nostrils, or any other orifice.

In moments of ecstasy, as when making love or when under the influence of psychotropic drugs – or both – the rigid boundary of self softens, and authentic experience is possible. Governments concern themselves with the sex lives and drug use of their subjects because sex and drugs (and even rock'n' roll) can create a borderless and storyless self, one that by definition will not be a part of a national or global meta-narrative.

Substitute the borders of a country or a farm or a city lot for the borders of the body and you can see how people can get so upset over illegal immigrants and youth gangs, especially the ones who don't work their fields or serve them Big Macs or keep their houses clean and lawns mowed.

Imagine yourself in a twenty-four hour scenario involving mescaline, marathon sex with illegal immigrants and youth gangs, all set to a tape loop playing the Bee Gees' *Stayin' Alive* at 120 decibels, and then try to imagine your false self waking up the next day and trying to fit back in its old life story.

7

Back when I could read fine print, I spent a winter reading the 1972 edition of *The Columbia History of the World*, authored by the Columbia University history faculty. I slogged through all 1,165 pages of it. It was spring when I finished. I was glad the book hadn't been published in 2072, after a lot more wars, refugee migrations, currency collapses and epidemics.

Not that reading all the way to 2072 wouldn't have been worth my while. I would have invested in Microsoft and Apple and Facebook and Google. I wouldn't have hiked to the base of Mount St. Helens in early May of 1980. I would have written a heartfelt letter to the young George W. Bush, begging him to stop his drinking before it caused irreparable brain damage.

But maybe it's better that history appears to end with this morning's cup of coffee and this edition of the paper. We wouldn't want to know if the weddings we attend are the opening acts of bitter divorces. Knowing where and what the next terrorist attack would be, for example, would start a desperate attempt to stop tragedy, with new tragedy coming out of the effort. A struggle with fate would replace freedom in our lives, and you don't have to be Oedipus to know that's a lousy trade-off.

Of course, the people with starring roles in *The History of the World* saw themselves free of fate, too, when in fact they were trapped within it. It's the way you and I are going to appear to any historian of 2072. We could all be in

the position of a Jewish physician with a loving family, a flourishing practice, a fine home – in Prague, in 1933.

8

But history never tells us what's going to happen. It only tells us what *can* happen. That said, knowing what *can* happen usually expands our estimation of what might happen. If you refrain from cherry-picking history to support your peculiar vision of the future, it can help you to understand how unpredictable and even unimaginable the future can be.

9

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *Oryx and Crake* shows a near-future where biotechnology underwrites the world economy, where health and truth are sold to the highest bidder, and where as soon as a technology is developed, it is immediately indentured to commerce. But Atwood is no prophet. The time she's writing about is our own, unexaggerated because there's no way to exaggerate what drug companies, life-extension researchers, and bioweaponers are doing right now. There is no way to exaggerate the commodification of the world, no way to pretend that uncontrolled technology isn't making us its slaves. Watch a kid playing a videogame, and you'll see what I mean.

Atwood writes in the grand tradition of dystopian novelists. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was about its year of publication, 1948. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* incarnated the dreams of 1930s eugenicists. H. G. Wells wrote *The Time Machine* as a satire on the class system in Edwardian England. Hailed as prophets of what would be, these writers just saw the implications of that which was.

10

The *DSM-IV*, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, contains a diagnosis called *Folie à Deux*. It means madness shared by two persons, and it's helpful to point at when you're trying to make a case that consensus reality, dependent as it is on false selves and false narratives, is a

form of psychosis. Such craziness does not live in neurotransmitter dysfunction, it lives in the space between two or more people.

The data does not make the reality. If Frank notices that all of Siberia is bubbling methane, Dave says that it's normal climate oscillation. If Frank says that tropical diseases are colonising Canada, Dave blames South American immigrants. If Frank notes that we're in the middle of a mass extinction, Dave demands to see the evidence because he just doesn't see any extinct animals around. If Frank says that the stock market is rising while more people lose their jobs, Dave praises the wisdom of the Free Market. If Frank quits his job, buys weapons and ammunition and a team of horses and moves to a small farmstead in an isolated valley in Alaska where the cabbages grow to the size of pumpkins, Dave sinks his life-savings into the stock market and studies to become a broker.

Fortunately, Frank and Dave are headed for consensus. Eventually Dave will join Frank in Alaska for cabbage-and-bear stew or Frank will move south to join Dave's brokerage as a junior partner. They are bound together in ways they don't consciously understand. In spite of their friendship and good will toward each other, each of their false selves is fighting for its life when they get into an argument. The false self that wins gets to write the story for the false self that loses. That's the nature of Frank and Dave, and unfortunately for their and our real selves, that's the nature of humanity. The false selves of the winners get to write the narrative for the false selves of the losers, which is another reason not to place your faith in History. Or even in Frank and Dave stories, set in a world where God is named Darrel.

Where is the real self in all this falsity and fiction? Often enough, to use a philosophical term, it's extinct. But if your real self is still alive, you can nourish it and heal it by carefully listening to and observing the world without preconceptions or paranoia. Buddhists say there's no such thing as a real self, but suggest that reality can be found in chopping wood and carrying water, which is a gnomic way of saying that reality – and the authentic self, if it exists – lives in doing and not in being, in the microcosm and not in the macrocosm, in production rather than distribution, and in witnessing the world rather than shouting it down.