

Mysteries in Broad Daylight

**An E-Zine about the deeper
meaning of everyday life"**

Life is a mystery in broad daylight." - Sartre

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Undershirt Reveals Downturn in the Housing Market

A professor friend of mine told me of a thought-provoking incident that occurred during his philosophy student days. It illustrates something quite amazing: the art of discerning the future in an everyday, seemingly trivial, event. It was a summer morning in Baltimore during the 1950s. My friend, who was himself a student at the time, was visiting one of his philosophy professors at his home in the suburbs. As student and professor sat chatting on the porch, a neighbor from across the street left his house, walked across to the front of his lawn, picked up the newspaper and returned to his house. "Did you see what I just saw?" inquired the professor. "Yes," replied my friend, a bit puzzled, "your neighbor got his paper." The professor took a drag from his pipe and then spoke, "That he did, but he didn't put on his shirt. He went out just wearing an undershirt. I've never seen this before in my neighborhood, which means...I'm putting my house on the market tomorrow morning."

The philosophy professor was able to sell his house within a few weeks — with impeccable timing — at just about the height of the market. The prices of houses in that

section of Baltimore started declining significantly about two months later.

The professor's decision was not based on statistical data. He didn't consult with local real estate brokers, nor did he hire an appraiser to do an analysis of real estate trends in the Baltimore area. His decision was based on sheer perspicacity, on the ability to discern in a single incident — a neighbor lacking the sense of propriety to put on his shirt before leaving his house — a cultural decline in the neighborhood and a consequent decline in the housing market. As we said in the last issue, life is always offering us signs, but we rarely look and listen to what is being revealed. Often these signs are little things — a man wearing an undershirt, or the story in papers about the three whales that we discussed in the previous issue of *Mysteries in Broad Daylight*.

The TV show *Survivor* was not a little thing. After all, the last episode had over 50 million viewers. But the real significance of this TV event has remained dark to us, until now that is...

What Price Survival?

Did you ever proudly say, "I'm a survivor"? Do you wish to survive under any and all circumstances? Have you concluded that if you don't look out for number one, who will? (Quick, answer "yes" or "no" to these questions before reading further!)

If you answered even a single "yes," you have a rendezvous with emptiness, chronic boredom and meaninglessness. For it is one of life's ironies that if there isn't anything worth dying for, then there isn't anything worth living for. Ergo, if survival is everything, then there is no point to surviving, for then life is no more than "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," as the despairing Macbeth declares. In other words, why survive if there is no purpose or meaning to life? Something of a different

order is needed to make life worth living.

Was the philosopher Socrates a survivor? He was condemned to death for corrupting the youth of Athens; in other words, Socrates committed the cardinal sin of making people think. Socrates could have fled Athens and sought sanctuary in neighboring Sparta. But Socrates rejected that convenient solution, because Socrates wasn't a survivor, he was a hero.

A hero is a person who believes that there are values more important than life itself, and is willing to die for them, if required, so that those values can survive. By contrast, a survivor is a person who believes that life is more important than values, especially when it comes to saving his own skin. This contrast will help us to understand the deeper significance of the TV show *Survivor*, as well as the nihilism of the modern age.

When the last episode of a TV show draws over 50 million viewers, you know that underlying the apparent drama of sixteen castaways on an island something deeper, something mythic, is being portrayed. *Survivor* is an expression of a question of great concern to people, even though they can't consciously state the question. It isn't the age-old moral dilemma, to which we just referred — the survival of one's body versus the survival of higher values. Having sought to evade that dilemma, we are thus confronted with a dilemma of another sort — what is most dear to us, our material well-being or the expression of our tastes, preferences, and values in the world?

Let's put it this way. To a large extent, we need money to objectify ourselves in the world. Otherwise, we feel like an artist without a canvas. We are living life solely in our head, and are plagued by a sense of unreality. Of course, we could be otherworldly and find true reality not in this world, but in the realm of eternal Forms or in Heaven. But if

we are psychologically invested in this spatiotemporal-world, as are most modern people, without money and property our connection to the world can feel tenuous at best, and freedom that is granted to us as a citizen of a democracy can seem no more than a legal abstraction.

The consequence of living in the material world, without the power to objectify ourselves in the world, to create, as much as is possible, our own freedom within the realm of conditions and circumstances, is to feel oppressed by a thousand petty tyrants, people who can affect our lives, from our boss at work, to the neighbors keeping us up at night with their party, to the school board threatening to teach our children values contrary to our own. That is why we seek money, the liquid form of private property, that promised guarantor of freedom in the material world, both to safeguard our material existence, and as to be the means to express, in the world, our tastes, preferences, values and beliefs. Money and property grant us the power to live our life as we choose. But here is the great paradox of capitalism. To get the money so that we can be free, we must conform to other people's wishes, we must at least to some extent sell out by conforming to what other people want, often contrary to our sense of true self.

Most of us work five days a week not as ourselves. We put on a smiley, ingratiating, brown-nosing face. And why? So that we can acquire the money to be our self for a few hours after work and on the weekend. We conclude, after a couple of exhausting years of this rhythm, that we made a bad bargain. But we don't know any way out. In desperation, some of us play the stock market or buy lottery tickets in the hope that we can acquire the material means to be free of our prison.

This is where the TV show Survivor comes in. We are fascinated by how each of the sixteen contestants wrestle with the question of whether to be themselves, by saying

what they think, by being outrageously blunt but honest, or rather to be politic, diplomatic, cautious, ingratiating, dissembling, crafty, to make alliances and to break alliances when necessary to survive. We root for those who seem to be themselves, honest and forthright, but we also admire those who are most calculating, crafty and cunning. The former is nobler in the mind, but the latter is healthier to the bank account.

As it turns out, the least popular of Survivor's contestants, the most Machiavellian, becomes the TV show's final survivor, and million dollar prize winner. Such is the way of the world, we conclude, and so we return to our jobs, holding our breath until the weekend, dreaming of our vacation, retirement or else plotting a scheme to get the financial wherewithal to be free.