

## **Introduction: Life & its daily exits**

Concerned that my poetry books were reaching no more than a few thousand readers and making no money for me or anyone else, my older brother Arthur would push, “Ronnie, you’re a psychiatrist, too. Why not write a self-help book?”

He had a point. Psychiatrists have indeed written inspirational books. One thinks of Karl Menninger, Rollo May, Erich Fromm and the occasional anti-psychiatrist like R. D. Laing, whom a colleague of mine once tried to comfort when the great Scottish psychiatrist broke out in bitter tears at a seminar he gave on birth trauma. I was in the room, and memorialized the incident in a poem, called “R. D. Laing.”

The more nitty-gritty business of daily self-help, however, has been largely left to psychologists, to the occasional inspirational figure like Tony Robbins and to physician writers like Deepak Chopra who try to blend Western wisdom with more Eastern approaches. There has also been a flurry of prosy but practical books stemming from Aaron Beck’s relatively new discipline of cognitive therapy.

A book of essays and letters hardly passes as self-help, except that in writing them, I am trying to help myself make sense of what has gone awry in North American society and abroad. Almost titled *Cowboys & Liberals*, this book is the culmination of some twenty years of writing letters to Canadian and American newspapers, urging that society do a better, saner job at controlling lethal agents like firearms, while also taking a closer look at how highly addictive activities might be affecting the readiness of our youth to emerge as the leaders of tomorrow. I also examine the common motivations that affect both psychological healers and writers, and the interface between these two remarkable callings.

There is nothing clinically insane about stocking one’s home with semi-automatic weapons in full working order, or even about advocating

that young children, their teachers and their grandparents are schooled in the use of and have ready access to such deadly weapons. There is nothing clinically insane about children and teenagers spending five or six hours at a stretch at first-person shooter (FPS) or role-playing video game, or devoting each weekend to bouts of smoking marijuana. Nor are 'physical culturalists' insane when they devote several hours each day to pursue optimal physical health. There is nothing robustly sane about such behaviour, either.

I am indebted to a recent book by British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, called *Going Sane*, in helping me better understand what I'm really trying to do with a book like this. Psychiatrists and poets are often stereotyped in movies as being a bit wingy and knee-jerk liberal in their politics. Alternatively, they may be portrayed as uptight normality salesmen, eager to step in and take away people's freedoms. They are often vilified for controversial treatments like shock therapy, but receive begrudging respect for their socially necessary role of having to testify on issues of insanity.

Dr. Phillips would urge us to develop a concept of what it might mean to be more deeply, effectively sane. This is not the same as being 'normal' and the greatest task with which a human being can be charged is to remain sane in an insane place or at an insane point in our history. Many of the Bush administration's delayed responses to the truly perverse attacks that occurred on 9/11 seemed to share the confusion that accompanied those attacks.

An old joke, quoted by Freud, describes a Liberal as "a man with his feet firmly planted in mid-air." I am not that kind of liberal. I hope, in this book, to temper my subjectivity with compelling facts drawn from more scholarly and evidence-based sources, while being open about my inner moral compass.

I am intrigued by the emerging view in neuropsychology advanced by Yale psychology professor Paul Bloom, that "each of us contains multiple selves – all with different desires, and all fighting for control." Some of these selves are longer-term and have long-term goals, while others, which arise in the context of, say, pleasure-seeking behaviour and addictions, are shorter-term and have more short-term, sometimes self-destructive goals. Those who set social policy have to consider whether and how to help steer their citizens towards longer-term behaviours that are in the best interests of society, while maintaining adequate respect for the rights of individuals to make choices. Nowhere do such issues loom larger than in areas in which governments feel moved to act to limit lethal agents, from speeding and street racing to cigarettes and alcohol to possession of unequivocally deadly agents like toxins, exotic pets and firearms designed to wound or kill multiple human beings.

While I set to work writing this introduction, world events began to unfold at a feverish pace, from the Wall Street meltdown to the Mumbai terrorist attacks to the Israeli incursion into Gaza, each of which had very personal resonance for me, not only as a psychiatrist preoccupied with the need to make the world a safer, saner place, but as a father, a Canadian and a liberal-minded Jew. I cannot read any newspaper article without these perspectives coming into play, though I try, as an occasional author of non-fiction, to remain aware of these biases as I do my best to evaluate new developments.

Given that this book was compiled immediately post-Bush, but is still, in a sense, pre-Obama, let me start with a letter to *The Toronto Star*, published about the time I completed the final draft of the essays in this book. I should mention that, after writing this, I regretted any aspersion I may have cast on the singularly successful and self-effacing star, Perry Como.

**Re: Regrets, he's had a few**

Letter to the Editor

(*The Toronto Star*, January 2008)

Thank you for the six full-colour mug shots of President George W. Bush. Your headline, from the song "My Way," written by Canadian Paul Anka, recalls Frank Sinatra, another man thought to have had flexible principles, as in his rumoured links with the Mob.

However, I think the singer that ought to come to mind as a comparison to Bush is Perry Como, whose hits include "Hot Diggity," "Catch a Falling Star" and "Dream on Little Dreamer." Like the soporifically smooth Mr. Como, Bush lulled us into accepting the material he let others write for him.

I like best the quote wherein Bush "readily concedes that (he) chucked aside some of (his) free-market principles," because it seems to me that chucking aside principles, especially on hard-core matters like the permissibility of torture, is very much what Mr. Bush is about. He has certain doctrinaire preferences, it's true, but he is, fundamentally, not all that serious a person; a fatal flaw in the man chosen to lead the free world.

Mr. Bush may be allowed to simply exit, stage right, pardoning his accomplices as he goes. Or there could yet be some sort of truth and reconciliation commission to hold him, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld to account, and make a really big deal about all those unnecessary casualties and exiles from the pointless, illegal war in Iraq.

In the area of domestic gun control alone, enough has been

dismantled under Bush's watch as to result in many more American fatalities at home, likely for decades to come. Mr. Bush's genius is his inveterate charm, and I don't know if the attention span of the American public is quite up to freezing the action and fully reviewing the sequence of just how so much was allowed to go so wrong.

*Cowboys & Bleeding Hearts* was completed in first draft on the eve of the 2008 American presidential election, whose result was pending. I gathered together these essays and letters during the last gasps of Bush's "category five" presidency, while much of the world prayed that the American people might make Barack Obama the country's first biracial president and give him a chance to chart a new course for the free world.

As the ballots were being counted, I wondered if I might have to rewrite some of the essays, depending on whether Barack Obama or John McCain became the forty-fourth president of the United States. Then I remembered that the laws of human nature do not change very quickly. You do not have to be a Conservative to acknowledge that.

Consider *Cowboys & Bleeding Hearts* as a call for action to reduce lethal elements in our society, particularly the rapid-fire guns that add a multiplier effect to human misery. It was inspired locally by the shooting of a Toronto mother, Louise Russo, in a Toronto sandwich shop, and by the slaying of eleven-year-old Ephraim Brown in his own neighbourhood, fifteen-year-old Jordan Manners in his own school and fifteen-year-old Jane Creba out shopping with her friends on Boxing Day. More broadly, there were the mass killings that took place at Columbine High School, L'École Polytechnique, Virginia Tech and Dawson College, to name but a few. My determination to speak out multiplied when I learned that a young Brazilian man shot fleeing London police, who had mistaken him for a terrorist, had taken six bullets to the head. I began to suspect that the lively new weapons churned out by the gun companies might be as much to blame as overly zealous police officers, and that the same issues might apply to tasers, which, as I had suspected, are over-powered, unreliable and overused.

The book also issues a call for people, especially young people, to consider where they are headed, and to reconsider the seductive, petty addictions that pull them away from engagement with the wider community. Many of these addictions are propagated through electronic media. There is now a lively debate about how the exposure of infants and young children to hours of television affects their developing brains. There are investigations into whether hours of television exposure might be correlated with the tenfold increase in diagnosed attention-deficit syndromes. The question, then, as to what hours spent in

closed-loop addictive diversions might do to a young person's core sense of reality is as much worth asking as how it might impact on his or her values.

Some of these essays highlight identity and race, traits of people which should enrich our social fabric but can also be seized on by some to divide us. I am enamoured of ethnicity and race, and would not want us all to magically blend into the same kind of person, in a world where we all spoke English or Esperanto to each other. I also believe, along with Freud, that human beings have a built-in need to aggress against each other and a moral duty to keep those aggressions minor. Growing up Jewish in the North End of Winnipeg, I learned to do cut-ups of many different accents, including a rich array of Jewish accents. Like Canadian comedian Russell Peters, I celebrate the diversity of our backgrounds, but also find the ethnic mosaic a rich source of humour. While I am not averse to seeing a movie like *Borat* or *Religulous*, I am also aware that, at any moment, presumed differences between groups can become no laughing matter. These differences can be exaggerated to the point of inspiring hate speech and even physical attack.

When I wrote the essays on the need for better gun control, I did not yet know that terrorist attacks on Mumbai would usher in American Thanksgiving. Their savagery was a terrible tragedy for the embattled peoples of India and Pakistan, and marked a turning point in world terrorism, since the attackers, in lieu of bombs, used the very kind of automatic weapons that now saturate the world. The young men involved in the Mumbai attacks functioned as a determined death cult, willing to die and willing to kill at point-blank range, in the most up-close and personal way. They killed Indians who were Hindu as well as their fellow Muslims. They killed foreigners for being foreign and, I feel compelled to add, Jews for being Jews.

As I contemplate their blind belief in the decadence and depravity of Western ways, I think about today's youth, and the mounting challenges they face to reverse a level of savagery in the world that has changed little over the centuries. Beheadings and throat-slitting still occur in Iraq and even Mexico, where gangs cut out each others' tongues. Rape is still the handmaiden of war, especially in Africa, which is already struggling with HIV/AIDS.

Many of our youth do seem up to the task of facing an unsettled future. Many I chat with are concerned about the environment. They understand the need for the wealthier nations to readjust to more "sustainable" ways of living in a world of rapidly depleting natural resources. Yet how ready are they to accept the torch we pass them, given how hard it is to pry themselves from a mind-numbing array of addictive drugs and entertainments? Are the addicted the same people prone to other

psychological disorders? Or can anyone get sucked into addictive spirals if the stimuli are sufficiently powerful or incessant? Early on, author Neil Postman wondered if we might be “amusing ourselves to death.”

My focusing on marijuana, video games and pornography is rather arbitrary. I could have instead written on binge drinking, thought to affect nearly half of all young drinkers, or about addiction to heroin and the controversies around social policies geared to treating heroin or cocaine addicts. My criticism of the lapse in entertainment standards in the admittedly educational exhibition Body Worlds 2 would apply even more so to the gladiatorial excesses of Ultimate Fighting Championships.

Alas, I chose these specific vices to write about based partly on my own experience. As a psychiatrist, I am an outsider with privileged insights into the drug or computer-driven preoccupations that I hear about from my patients. Nor am I entirely a stranger to periods of excess, but rather, can also sing these words from Paul Simon’s song “The Boxer,” “I do declare there were times when I was so lonesome, I took some comfort there.”

My intention is not to hurl the cynic’s ban, but rather to help increase mindfulness about how we spend our time and with what we fill our beleaguered minds. I want to address these questions without becoming too much of a scold. I do not relish becoming what Freud described as “an injustice collector,” yet every time I learn of a new shooting, I cannot help but pay close attention to *just how many bullets* were fired; when I hear of an addictive habit, I ask *just how many hours* of a person’s day it consumes, and to what extent it waylays their plans or their ambitions.

In the perilous wake of the Bush presidency, after The Bonfire of Junk-Bond Inanities, and in the face of zealous enemies who denounce our relatively easy, free-wheeling way of living, we would do well to focus on these issues.