

Danville News Column
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"The Mathematics of Guilt"
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There has been one benefit from the catastrophe in Japan. The media's lurid fascination with force feeding us with the latest news about Charlie Sheen has been bumped as the lead story. It is amazing, I know, but somehow the world seems to believe that the latest updates about the meltdown going on in Japanese nuclear reactors could be slightly more important than the Charlie Sheen train wreck.

Well, on most news channels. Well, still, a few of those channels (which pretend to be news) still believe we need to be privy to the latest juicy tweet, twitter, or indiscretion. Giggle, giggle. Titter, titter. Another so-called news channel spent airwave time predicting exactly how, given the problems at the Japanese nuclear plant in Fukushima, those nasty and opportunistic liberals will spin the inherent dangers of nuclear energy and lobby against new facilities. Darn those opportunists! But then, consider the source: we all know how these false news channels inappropriately yet cleverly edit interviews to incriminate and promote their ideological propaganda. Opportunism, it seems, isn't limited to liberals.

Which is why, for their entertainment value, I only casually watch such fake news shows. They offer passing humor, as well as incentive to lament the preponderance of lousy journalism. We need to pay attention to the real stuff. I admit how these days I have been transfixed by the news (when I can find real news to read, hear, or view). We stand on the shoreline of history and are dumbfounded. We behold with slack jaw the ruthless and inexorable power of water. Whole cities churned to heaps of debris. A island shifted eight feet. Aftershocks. Meltdowns. Cesium. Hydrogen explosions. Can they in Japan really call it the 'China Syndrome' or would utter meltdown be more precisely called the "Uruguay Syndrome?"

I also wonder how I would handle such a dramatic reversal. Imagine the scenario for yourselves: a calm Friday afternoon one minute, making plans for the weekend, thinking of what to cook for dinner, desperate ruin the next, running for your life. I am haunted by the Japanese woman crying gently as she shyly talked about how her daughter was washed away from her arms. She doesn't know where her daughter is, she doesn't know if her daughter survived. Rather makes our interest in how rich the football players and the owners will become next season both annoying and pitiful. Rather makes our anxiety over whether or not Penn State will win their next game tiresome. Or even us fretting about increasing gasoline prices. Rather makes the things that divide us equally pitiful and insignificant.

Calamity and adversity puts much in perspective.

I suppose I too am an opportunist. All this horror in Japan makes me mindful of the sorrow caused by the swift caprice of nature versus the sorrow intentionally caused by all our bad choices. With all the natural disasters, it makes you fed up with all of our man-made disasters. Hurricane Katrina: 1,836 dead. Earthquake in Haiti: 222,570 dead (and counting). 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami: 230,000 dead. The deadliest earthquake? In China in 1976: at least 655,000 dead.

Given these numbers, how stupid and pathetic we are to spend so much energy and potential causing pain to others, from the drug cartels in Juarez to Moamar Ghadafi. The mathematics of our guilt. I am pleased to hear that the Arab League supported the no-fly zone. Good. Now let them enforce it rather than Saudi Arabia rely upon their mercenaries (otherwise know as the US military).

I ponder how adaptable we would be. We've had a mere taste of it with our own local flooding. But we really haven't endured the devastating, comprehensive nationwide catastrophe. The closest we've come to it was over a hundred and fifty years in such places as Richmond, Chattanooga, Atlanta. It is hard to fail to be impressed with the decorum demonstrated by the Japanese population. One reporter spoke about going to fill her water buckets and waiting in line for water, everyone taking turns, everyone helping each other. Another reporter pointed out the long lines of families waiting patiently for the grocery store to open, each realizing they would be limited to only ten items. Would we be so decent?

We see a disciplined, polite and civilized nation. Their inner attitude will be the secret to the Japanese recovery. Would we claw for water and food, or would our better natures emerge and we'd resolve to work for our brothers and sisters?