*S. Allen, KitKat Essy 3, March 19, 2024, Columbus. OH*

Dystopia Now:

The question, The Conversation, and the Post It Note

*- by Sean Allen*

Like many essays, this one started with a relatively simple question I had been thinking about for a long time which is this: What percentage of the entire world’s economy is not legitimate? Or to put it another way, of the money made in the entire world how much is done illegally.

Seems like a pretty simple question, I could have googled this years ago, arrived at an answer and not thought about it again until it came up as a fact relevant to a broader discussion.

I did not do that.

Rather I kept thinking about it. My estimate of the world’s dark finances grew and became complicated by data and details. For instance, a multi-national corporation like General Electric does legitimate business in South America. But to get access to a key decision maker they need to participate in some manner of payoff scheme that would be consider bribery. Where does that count? It’s certainly not as clearly dark as drug dealing or human trafficking but it’s not legitimate by US legal standards.

That lead to a consideration of the millions of hoax offers on social media, the new crop of charlatans such as Elizabeth Holmes and Sam Bankman Fried who seem to genuinely not understand they are criminal hucksters. Nearly every technology tool we own seems to deliver an equal part assistance and low-level scam. It feels like 9/10 phone calls are some sort of ruse, email is nearly ruined by spam much of which is for some chicanery or other. Engagement with social media is never without some questionable offer and Craigslist, which could be credited with cutting off the lifeblood revenue of classified ads and choking newspapers out of business, is now mostly a hub for scams. Not to mention cryptocurrency and dark web sites like Silk Road.

The exploration of this question eventually led down a focus-less rabbit hole. I started to become distracted by detail and facts. I began to question whether I might be experiencing the early stages of dementia and losing the ability to think with any coherence. The jury still may be out on that, but in any case, it was not fun.

Eventually I determined that this essay had become the nexus of three unconnected items, thus spawning the subtitle of this essay: The Question, The Conversation and the Post It note.

CUT TO VIDEO\_(click link or cut/paste into a new window)\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ti8cd5l-Hx4

The Question I have already mentioned: How large is the global dark economy?

The Conversation took place here. I was sitting with my friend Allen Proctor and we were discussing something having to do with persons younger than ourselves. At one point he said “…they have seen nearly nothing except the worst 20 years in American History.” This was as thought provoking as the question about the dark economy.

The Post It note is taped to the refrigerator at my sister’s house. It is written in my mom’s cursive handwriting and it simply says, “Fun is Important.” Why it was jotted down and when I don’t know. It was likely penned 2 decades ago at least. I had not thought about it until it was mentioned while I was trying to formulate this essay.

The years since September 11, 2001 have been mostly not great. Some milestones have been reached. The Presidential election of Barrak Obama stands out as a notable leap forward for the American experiment but the celebration of that which seemed to transcend politics was immediately extinguished by the financial crisis that adversely touched nearly everyone.

For a very few the crisis was a windfall. One such case was a fellow I went to high school and college with who has spent his career handling the investment portfolios of extremely high net-worth clients in Palm Beach. He works for one of the investment firms that was not Lehman Brothers or Bear Sterns who went paws up. Instead, his firm, like all large banks and financial institutions, was mandated to take something from the bailout solution that the Government offered. This friend and classmate, had no idea if his firm was next to join the ranks of Lehman and Bear Stears only to arrive at work and be presented with a bonus check for $3 million. This was not for the whole firm or his division. This was for him.

The winners in this crisis were few; this antidote is a small example of a Gladwellian Blink moment that was a glimpse into the future of an acceleration of wealth inequality. In a society full of curated transparency this lends itself nicely to the diminishing of fun. In his February 2022 essay “The Biggest Toy” Proctor explored in great detail the relationship between economic security and happiness. I would recommend re-reading it at your leisure. It’s compelling.

One of the many ways this widening of wealth inequality plays out is the concept of “funflation” as mentioned in an October 2023 Wall Street Journal article entitled “It’s Getting Too Expensive to Have Fun”

This year’s low-priced Superbowl ticket was $7000. The majority of tickets were in the $20,000-$30,000 range. A ticket to Superbowl 1 was $10 (AFI $90.21). A Superbowl ticket didn’t reach $100 (AFI $256). until 1988. A ticket to the big game hit the $1000 mark in 2009 (AFI $1398.71). Note, this is not the average ticket price per year, but simply the cost of one ticket to enter the stadium.

When examining the past one must take cautions to not slip into revisionist nostalgia for a time that really never was. That said, when over a short period of time lightspeed change has resulted in much fundamental good lost, we do need to look at where we are now, where we were and determine how best to add back in the quality-of-life parts of human existence that are quickly facing extinction.

(water)

*What is fun?*

Subjective as it may be, Fun is an activity for no other purpose than enjoyment. It involves letting go of inhibitions and embracing a lighthearted attitude. Fun inspires positive emotions.

Social connection is a near universal aspect of fun. Even in cases of a solo endeavor such as woodworking the vast majority of the fun of it comes from the anticipation then subsequent sharing of one’s creation.

Fun often thrives on novelty and variety. Trying new things, exploring unfamiliar places, and stepping outside of comfort zones can spark excitement and rejuvenate the sense of fun and curriocity.

Fun a fundamental aspect of human existence that adds vibrancy and richness to our daily lives.

Fun is a release and sharing of positive communal energy.

Without fun, civilization as we know it will cease to exist.

Fun is important.

Most everyone has a familiarity with what fun is. Especially in this room. It’s my assumption all of us are here for fun. I could be the exception to that because of the obligation I signed up for to do exactly what I am doing right now. But as we all know the essay ends up being fun if at no other point than when it’s finished. The central question of this endeavor is why has fun become elusive and what can we do about it?

Is it a vast conspiracy of technical complication and relentless media panic that has led us to underrating the importance of fun?

Have we subjected ourselves to unhappiness by a thousand clicks?

Was Walt Kelly’s Pogo right when he stated, "we have met the enemy, and he is us."?

At exactly the same time The Kinks made their B-Side musical query “Where Have All the Good Times Gone?” the book Future Shock started life as an article in the Summer 1965 issue of *Horizon* Magazine entitled "The Future as a Way of Life." by futurist Alvin and Heidi Toffler. From this, a number of accurate forecasts about the future we now inhabit came to exist. Among them:

* “Change is not merely necessary to life — it is life.”
* “Technology feeds on itself. Technology makes more technology possible.”
* “Change is the only constant.”

Each of these are challenges that fly in the face of the very nature of a carbon-based life form. Evolution, the only known natural change mechanism for living organisms, is inherently a reactive force. A body does not grow a horn because it wants one or anticipates the need for one in the future. It grows from an immediate environmental necessity.

(((As an aside, I am using Tofflers in plurality. While Alvin Toffler is the credited author of Future Shock, by all accounts his wife Heidi Toffler contributed equally to "The Future as a Way of Life." article and in fact coined the phrase, “change is the only constant.”)))

*Media*

In about 36 months in the 1980’s our media landscape became unrecognizable from that which existed in previous decades. In the 1950s and 1960s, the average advertisement's length was one minute. Starting in the early 1970s, the average length shrank to 30 seconds. The 15-second commercial began to appear around 1987. Of course, this was done for improved profitability in the broadcast advertising industry which sells time. Since there is no practical means of creating more inventory or time, slicing the inventory thinner and selling it for close to the same price is a reasonable solution to creating more supply to meet demand. It also creates more profit. Essentially an historic example of what we now know as Shrinkflation. Pay the same if not more, get less.

Young people were primed for this phenomenal change partly by the advent of the music video which used quick cuts and fast camera work to tell a story in three minutes that used to take 20 minutes for a short film or two hours for a feature-length theatrical release. Even the 10-minute Looney Tunes Cartoons were three times longer and had about 1/5 of the edits of a 1980’s music video. This short attention span theater was a harbinger for Tik Tok. Recent published researchers at the University of Texas discovered that anxiety and attention span are linked. The problems with shorter attention spans are many; creating anxiety is but one.

While we are on the subject of media and its role in killing fun, it’s worth mentioning how the business of news has changed over the last 40 years. My first essay in 2009 was on this topic so I will try to be as brief as possible in my rehashing of it. In the 18-month period from mid-1985 to the end of 1986 all three networks were acquired by large, publicly traded companies. Previous to this time all network news operations lost millions of dollar year after year. The network owners at the time were still essentially the same people that started the networks back in the early days of television. They felt, as did the FCC who grated them license to use the public airwaves for free, an obligation to inform and educate the public with clear and unbiased-as-possible information in the form of news.

A quaint notion by current standards.

At the networks the entertainment division made all kinds of money exponentially outstripping the losses of news. The new corporate owners of the networks did not share this passion for responsibly informing the public and definitely did not feel an obligation to fund it despite paying no substantial fees for the use of public airwaves. The new owners wanted news to make money like entertainment did. So, news, in short order, *became* entertainment. Serving the public trust was a distant second to profit. At the time Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric who owned NBC, expressed his skepticism about the News Division’s public trust responsibility and losing money. Paraphrasing, he said, ‘GE makes airplane engines, we make money on airplane engines, I don’t need a lecture in the importance of the public trust from a news producer.’

A valid point but not an apt comparison and the results over time have spoken for themselves. The news has never had less credibility, has an ever-shrinking audience and has become nearly unrecognizable as an actual journalistic endeavor.

The 1976 movie *Network*, written by a thoroughly disenchanted Paddy Chayefsky, was as accurate a glimpse into a bizarre future as was the Toffler’s Book *Future Shock*.

And what does that have to do with fun? Not much except these works were a warning to us all that the future was rife with change and it might not be fun.

*Technology*

While listing all that has conspired to make things less fun would take hours, one other force majeure that has thrown a wet towel on fun is technology.

There are many examples of technology being an incredible advancement for humankind. Nowhere is that clearer than in the area of healthcare. Technology has helped make billions of people physically healthier and overcome ailments and disabilities that in previous decades were inevitably awful if not quickly fatal. Medical technology has given length to life itself.

There is a flip side to tech that has not made life better, in fact it has made life markedly worse.

I would not go so far as to say medical science has made it possible to live longer but technocrats have made us not want to, but death by the frustration of a 1000 apps does seem to be running its onerous course. The personification of this technocrat is Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. While his many billions had bought him the best lesson in tact money can buy, he and his ilk are still far from being tapped in to what the average human being finds fun.

By and large, the modern technocrat does not put human happiness into their consideration matrix when developing the next great thing. They literally don’t care. They don’t care if you don’t want to download another app just to go to your daughter’s cheerleading competition, they don’t care if your banking app stops working because you didn’t update something. They don’t care about what is actually convenient and fun for you.

The ridiculous Silicon Valley trope “to make the world a better place” is at once insincere and a hubris-filled proclamation made by children who unironically don’t even know what the world actually is. This phrase was relentlessly parodied on HBO’s series Silicon Valley for a very good reason.

In the case of Zuckerberg, despite his vast wealth, what would he possibly know about anything beyond his creation Facebook and Meta? He’s never done anything but be a whiz at knowing how to make technology do things. As far as I have found, he’s never waited tables, worked a lousy retail job or had an irritating boss. He certainly is no expert on skilled social interaction and human communication yet less than 2 decades ago the collective we turned over social interaction to an apparatus he created because he was terrible at getting along with people. An admitted over simplification, however, court documents alleging that Zuckerberg personally rejected Meta's proposals to improve teenagers' mental health do exist. As does proof that he consistently opposed efforts to enhance well-being on Facebook and Instagram, vehemently overriding senior executives at both companies.

In preparation for this essay, I looked into the development of the telephone and it turns out Alexander Graham Bell didn’t invent the phone out of anger or the intent of making others angry. In short, what technology has done for us as a living organism, social media has undone for us as a civilized society. In an incredibly short period of time a shifting reality has led to shifting economy and led to shifting morality, this was something the Toffler’s only touched on when proclaiming humans must learn to adapt to change ad nauseum.

As pointed as my criticism of Zuckerberg and the modern technocrat is, I don’t blame them as human beings. Zuckerberg has donated hundreds of millions of dollars to worthy causes. The problem is something I would call Technological Single Vision and maniacal adherence to it. A belief that technology can solve every known problem to all living things and that anything that exists already can and should be improved with technology is as narrow minded as any other blind subscription to orthodoxy.

*Why have fun?*

Like the definition of fun, the significance of fun in life seems obvious. However, in our increasing haste to manage change, we can forget to embrace it.

Fun is an essential and often underestimated aspect of human existence. As individuals navigate the complexities of daily life, the pursuit of joy, amusement, and lightheartedness plays a crucial role in shaping our well-being. It affects all aspects of our being including our psychological, physical, and social health well as our emotional and mental state.

According to the late Dr. Karyn Purvis, world-renowned developmental psychologist at Texas Christian University (TCU), without playful engagement it takes over 400 repetitions to create a synapse in the brain known as true learning but just about 12 repetitions to create a synapse when play is used to teach. Fun helps us learn. Toffler states, “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be the person who cannot read and write. It will be the person who does not know how to learn, unlearn and relearn.” Even though the Toffler’s frame the rapid change of the future as a cautionary tale, and don’t particularly mention fun could lend its self to our cognitive salvation, the implication of fun’s critical nature is clear.

Fun, as shorthand for engaging in some enjoyable activity, has also proven to have a positive effect on any number of critical aspects of life. Coping with challenges and developing emotional resilience are easier when paired with fun. Laughter, a key element of fun, releases tension and promotes emotional well-being. Cardiovascular health is positively impacted and distraction from chronic pain is observed by stress reducing fun. As cliché as it is, laughter is indeed the best medicine.

Fun helps build relationships, communication skills, and social engagement. Personally, this is something I have witnessed on a daily basis for the last 15 years. In my last essay professional wrestling was used as a vehicle to illustrate the transcendent human language of entertainment. But it was really about how my son Nick overcomes his extreme speech challenges by utilizing the dramatic storytelling of pro wrestling. The lynch pin in his lifetime engagement with the world is fun. If he has any language at all, it is the fun he radiates to everyone he meets.

When discussing creativity, the director Tim Burton observed that nearly all children possess some belief in their own creativity. “…you never hear a 6-year-old say they can’t draw.” said Burton. In the same way a belief in one’s personal creativity is squeezed out of many by adulthood, fun is also something that many adults must consciously attempt to regain in their lives. This involves consideration of a few things that perhaps one has not thought much about in decades.

* Identify that which brings joy. This may be easier said than done. Maybe it could involve hypnosis or meditation. Maybe meditation its self brings one joy. In any case one must know what makes them feel happy and fulfilled.
* Put fun on the schedule. If it is important enough, one finds the time. Fun is important.
* Don't take yourself too seriously.
* Unplug and reconnect with the present moment. Immerse oneself fully in the activity at hand.
  + *For instance, watching a movie at home… riff*
* Set yourself up for fun. Being run down, tired, and stressed keeps fun at bay.
* Maintaining balance, an open mind, and flexibility helps navigate the inevitable and rapid change of modern life.
* Celebrate small victories.

This one could be the unsung hero of fun. Former CEO Jack Welch, while not a fan of losing money on news, did have an affinity for this one. Speaking to an auditorium full of high achieving young people, he asked this audience, “Who here has recently celebrated their success?” Nothing.

Everyone invited to this event had experienced some significant level of professional success.

Again, he asked, “I am not talking about an expensive party or anything extravagant, I just mean celebrating a success with a special bottle of wine or dinner with your significant other.” Again, nearly nothing. Maybe two dozen hands raised in an audience of over 3000.

“OK. Then I really need to ask, what are you waiting for? Each one of you has accomplished something you should have celebrated. There’s no way you would be here otherwise, yet you don’t celebrate. When are you planning to? If you don’t celebrate the small things you will never celebrate at all, and consequently you will not end up having fun.”

*Wrap up:*

The importance of fun in life cannot be overstated. From profound psychological and physical benefits to its role in social relationships and personal development, fun is a fundamental component of a well-rounded and meaningful existence.

Incorporating enjoyable activities into daily routines is not a self-indulgent act but a proactive investment in overall health and happiness. Embracing fun enriches our lives, fostering resilience, creativity, and a deep sense of fulfillment. As change is indeed the only constant, understanding and valuing the significance of fun is paramount to healthy navigation of inevitable change.

*In the end:*

I suppose the tenuous nature of connection between the question, the conversation and the Post It note conspires to make this essay as much an exploration of non-linear thinking as it is an attempt to answer The Kinks in 1965 and again Van Halen in 1982 “Where Have All the Good Times Gone?”

The truth is they have not likely gone anywhere. It’s we who have forsaken fun.

Like 1965 being the same year The Kinks asking about Good Times coinciding with the Toffler’s first warning that we should be taking the acceleration of change seriously, it’s probably no coincidence that the same year Pogo stated, "we have met the enemy, and he is us." the Tofflers published Future Shock. It was 1970 and American society seemed unstable. Two Kennedys and Martin Luther King had been assassinated. Pollution was so bad that the Cuyahoga River caught on fire a year earlier. Civil unrest was a common occurrence culminating in the Ohio National Guard killing 4 students at Kent State in May.

Our very own Brent DeVore was there and his November, 2013 essay entitled “12.24” is about his experience that day. I would encourage looking this up as well.

Kelly’s Pogo perfectly summarizes mankind’s tendency to create our own problems. In this case, Kelly’s variation on a phrase was created for an anti-pollution Earth Day poster in 1970. He was clearly stating we have only ourselves to blame for the pollution and destruction of our environment. The same could be said in 2024 if we ignore the importance of fun in our own lives and allow things we invented to rule over our well-being.

In 1992 George Carlin, characterized humanity as an evolutionary cul de sac positing that maybe the answer to the age-old philosophical question “why are we here” is to cover the Earth in plastic. His point, as he was uniquely equipped to express it, was that while we may be an irritant to the planet we tend to default to incredible hubris when we think we will save the planet when we can’t even take care of ourselves and each other.

Carlin eventually became so embittered and disenchanted with humanity he divorced himself from the human race. Witty and sharp as almost anyone in history, nonetheless he had given up. He was no longer amused. He was no longer having fun and it eventually killed him.

We have become our own executioners of fun. We don’t need to consume so much. There was life before social media and there is no imperative that anyone subscribe to any of it. Most of us have smartphones and somethings are harder to do without one but it’s not required. We can consciously choose who and what gets our time and attention. We still have self-determination for the time being and we should exercise that consciously. We need not throw open the window and yell, we need not be mad as hell. We only need to know change is here and more is coming.

Today is the first day of Spring, the season of rebirth, make it a time for fun.

*epilogue*

And to answer the question we started with, about the economic size of if illicit trade; if illicit trade were its own county, it would be the number 3 economy in the world after the US, China and ahead of Japan. At a best-estimate of over $5 trillion dollars much of this in in the form of money laundering ($2.6T). Other big exports of Crimeganistan are transnational crime (nearly $2T), bribery($1T), narcotics($500B), counterfeit goods ($500B), environmental crimes ($200B) human trafficking($150B), and illegal tobacco products($50B).

Big numbers, yet none of that sounds the least bit fun.