

Coffee Spoons

by david schleich

During our recent conversation my friend Bruno informed me that the most intelligent young people of our generation are not coming to university. He announced that university officials are not at all sure where these brilliant drop-outs are hiding or what they are doing. My reaction to his news annoyed Bruno slightly.

"Bruno," I said, stirring my coffee with a plastic spoon, "certainly you realize that in every generation the most intelligent people always avoid the academies. They feel no need for the safety of rewards and documentation. The rest of us drudge away at credentials because we're afraid to go it alone. We're afraid to live open-endedly. We don't trust the unpredictable. Degrees and diplomas slot us nicely. Once tolerably slotted we're almost able to predict the future. We come back year after year until we're reasonably sure that we can make a living comfortably."

"They'll come back too," Bruno declared, scratching his head.

"No they won't come back!" I insisted, setting my coffee down on the table. "They'll manage quite nicely at the periphery of our culture.

Because they know that for the first time it's possible to take advantage of an economy of abundance without participating directly in that economy. They take what they need and ignore the rest. The rest of us hardly notice what they take. They're quite clever at living wholesomely for next to nothing."

Bruno was still swallowing some coffee when I stopped talking. He shook his head, swallowed and breathed heavily.

"They will come back," he began, taking a quick swallow from his coffee cup. "They'll come back as soon as they get tired of living from hand to mouth. They'll slowly drift back into the mainstream and get assimilated just like the rest of us. By staying out they're hampering the economic continuity that makes an abundance of goods possible in the first place. They're parasites. Why are they so unwilling to participate in the productive economy?"

"Because participating means taking on a full time job!" I answered quickly. "And taking on one of those," I continued, "means tolerating a host of other elaborate impositions. Like, when you eat and when you sleep and what you wear and when you work and when you play. Things speed up. Go ahead and work for some corporation—a white collar job—and they won't let you wear simple, functional clothes. You've got to start buying expensive suits. One suit will feed a person easily for a month. Everything speeds up. You eat less carefully, sleep less naturally, play less fully. And you work less honestly. You're obliged to adopt the value systems of your immediate work superiors. Those kids that have dropped out simply have no interest in regimented daily lives for the sake of money and economic security. They're not about to trade the journey for some obscure destination. They want to live now."

"So do the rest of us want to live now!" snapped Bruno. "That's why recreation industries are booming. That's why consumer spending triples every decade! What's wrong with participating in the economy if you can get what you want now! Some people prefer to own their own homes, you know. And some people prefer to make use of modern appliances. Who the hell wants to spend three hours churning butter when you can get the stuff for about five minutes worth of salary?"

"Some people prefer to make their own butter, Bruno. And others aren't interested in fast foods, snowmobiles, power steering and credit cards. In fact the mindless consumption that rewards the salaried worker would, I expect, rather bore these kids who've dropped away from universities."

"Well what's wrong with people doing what pleases them? If they happen to like power steering, what's wrong with that?"

"I'm convinced that what pleases the indulgent snowmobile owner pleases him because a slick media ad told him he would be pleased. It's all quite mindless. Indulgent."

"So do you deny them the right to spend their time and money the way they want?" Bruno demanded.

"No, but it's wishful thinking to suppose that such mass indulgence and mindless consumption can continue to increase and it is completely unreasonable to expect the economy of abundance to last."

"Technological progress is a fact, not a myth! New goods and services are being developed all the time and always will be!" Bruno snorted, annoyed at the quiet, mocking tone of my voice.

"An economic system committed to aggressive growth and incessant diversification is going to do itself to death," I said quietly. "Too much stuff being half-consumed by too many people too quickly and too often. The whole works'll go belly-up before I'm forty."

"Nonsense," shrieked Bruno. "You artsy-craftsy guys are always running around bellowing apocalyptic sermons. You condemn the systems that feed you better than any system has fed any generation in history. You mock the only system that has consistently tolerated and protected free speech and universal private enterprise. And you castigate the systems of research and knowledge which make more and more of the earth's resources available for man's use. Instead of

disestablishing them you should have more faith in them. They're all we've got."

Bruno butted a cigarette into his empty coffee cup. He looked me straight in the eye and continued:

"Well, what the hell do you believe in?" he demanded. "What else have we got besides an economic system that had diminished physical suffering more than any other," he snapped and then added quickly, "or would you prefer to be some kid in an English coal mine back in the 1840's?"

"Capitalists and entrepreneurs put kids in coal mines, Bruno."

"Well what else have we got besides what we can build and make? Nature's not going to give me a warm bus to go around in. I've got to get out and build it myself! I've got to look around me and decide what's to be done to make this ridiculous seventy years more comfortable. I've got to conquer the elements or they'll conquer me. If we don't try we might as well jump off cliffs, all of us."

Bruno was getting heated. He was impatient with me. I showed no signs of agreeing with him or even of acknowledging the strength of some of his arguments.

"Suppose there are people who don't require guarantees and warm busses to be happy," I began. "Suppose there are people who don't want to subdue Nature. Suppose there are people who just want to go along with the way things move naturally, without elaborate production systems?"

"No guarantees!" Bruno cried. "No chance to control our own circumstances? Is that what you want? Surely you'll agree that the world and the people in it are better off than they were two thousand years ago when some despot could chop your head off if it pleased him or when some stupid disease like chicken pox could wipe out thousands?"

"We have the greatest tyrants in the history of our species right now," I asserted. "Only they've got buttons instead of axes. And big jets instead of phalanxes. And people still die today, just like always."

"But we've got laws to protect us against tyrants. And we've got the most efficient and promising medical research establishment in the history of man. We'll conquer disease, prolong life, eliminate starvation and pollution..."

"You insist on this idea of progress," I interjected. "I just cannot completely trust that world view. Within the whole spectrum of possibility our way of life is as accidental as the arrangement of grains on a sandy beach."

"But the pattern of sand grains on beaches is determined by certain immutable laws—empirically verified laws. It wasn't by running around with latter-day doomsday book that men discovered those laws. You're ready to let fate govern everything, aren't you? Well, I figure there's plenty in the human condition which isn't in fate's hands and while we can fight, we should fight. The idea is to get on with it. Let's restore ecological balances. But let's not return to tenth century plumbing or tenth century feudalism or tenth century leper colonies."

We sat through an uncomfortable and long silence. Bruno stared angrily, confident that he had made his points beyond refutation. Finally I spoke:

"I think you're right about the latter-day doomsday book. And maybe there's something to the position that indulgence in the existential moment only leads to the one truly serious philosophical problem, suicide. But the same scientific optimism that makes you confident about your world view of progress and constant improvement has also made nuclear annihilation a fact. Your science tries to make it impossible for the present generation to trust in anything which is not controlled or directed by men and their laws. In fact, your science has killed trust of any kind."

"Look," Bruno thundered, "no damn scientist is going to press the button and blow us all up! Ever since the bomb there have only been regional wars. No world confrontations. It's a paradox but it's true. By developing the ultimate weapon we've effectively made world war obsolete."

There was another long pause. Finally Bruno continued:

"I wonder what those kids think who aren't here at the university? The ones we started talking about in the first place. The drop-outs. They're pretty trusting, aren't they? Leaving the running of things in the future up to us? You'd think they'd want to have some sort of say about how things are run considering how they figure things are being run so badly now."

"They have more say than you and I, perhaps, in how the things of their own lives are run, Bruno. And that, in the end, is just about all any of us can ever hope for, don't you think? The bigger stake you get in the productive economy the less control you have over your own integrity and your own life."

He didn't answer me. Shaking his head slightly he muttered the time to me. We put our tray with the paper cups and plastic spoons on the conveyor belt. Around us other students ate quickly and talked loudly. We both rushed off to classes.

Sensational points to ponder

I Am A Sensation
Gerry Goldberg
and
George Wright
McClelland and Stewart Ltd.

I must admit to being impressed with *I Am A Sensation* when I first encountered it. In fact I had originally intended writing something like embark on an odyssey to Ur-Na-La where you can lap the dew drop, lying ready to explode on the White Petals, and bask in their nectar." Besides being empty bullshit, it made no sense and had nothing to do with the book. Which brings us neatly to the review.



"*I am a Sensation*" is primarily a coffee table book on the questions of existence. In its 158 page length, it dabbles in the future, the past, death, existence, love, alienation, loneliness, fear, and experience, and none of it is original thought. Authors Goldberg and Wright draw liberally from Blake, Proust, Camus, Fromm, and countless others. With backing like that, how can you lose? Add a few graphics and voila—instant merchandise. The book reads like a massive Points to Ponder section from a psychedelic Reader's Digest.

But don't be confused, the contents of this book make wondrous reading in places. It's the concept behind it that I object to. Skepticism engendered hampers the purging of emotions associated with works of such substance. The divine nimbus that surrounds truly worthwhile efforts is missing and the book just lies there.



(optional conclusion)

I hope I haven't offended the book. There are stirrings in the nimbus—Oh God, I hope all the pages don't fall out in anger. But that's absurd.

by David Bird