

## Peacemakers #6 Brainworks

Kim and I recently finished *The Tudors*, an HBO series depicting the homicidal self-indulgence of King Henry VIII of England. Nightly, the Lancasters slip into a semi-comatose state in ritual preparation for sleep, melting into massive mauve La-Z-Boys like lumps of sun-struck butter. Sofie's dream-barks muffle beneath a lap throw. *Dexter*, *Six Feet Under*, *Sopranos*, Jack Bauer, *West Wing*, *Band of Brothers*, Tara's multiple personality gyrations, *Breaking Bad*, and a long trail of Netflixed others murmur from our 1980s small-screen CRT Panasonic. Henry Rex's tale mimicked all the others. A hero (or anti-hero) confronts a villain (or anti-villain), stumbling over ethical hurdles while saving (adventures) or failing to save (tragedies) mankind (or its surrogate—a country, town, family, or friend). Right prevails (as justice demands) or doesn't (as infamy mandates). The storylines are fustily trite, yet quietly fulfilling. The stories touch me deeply, even when inane. Perhaps this betrays the shallowness of my pond. Or perhaps these tales recapitulate myths, abyssal narratives that loop ceaselessly just below the thin skin of consciousness.

Much conflict, and therefore much peacemaking, concerns the stories people tell themselves. Most people prefer to play the hero in their dramas. Conflict resolution often consists in getting everybody to set their white hats aside and consider a different tale, especially a less virulent narrative about their perceived opponent. People find this task difficult. So do their peacemakers. Surely, we are ignorant about much concerning people with whom we have conflict. We could inquire. Certainly, we are prejudiced about some facet of the habits, body, illness, sex, creeds, deviancies, race, dialects, friends, inflections, or clothing of an enemy. We could confess. Most, we fear creating anything better with “nasty” people, because we do not know with certainty the outcome of stories that have never before been told. We could get a grip. The same old story is not that safe or interesting. What, then, makes the Hero-Villain story so compelling?

Jaak Panksepp, professor at Washington State University and author of *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions*, studies the neuroanatomical structures from which emerges mammalian emotion. Dr. Panksepp argues that “affects,” which include both emotions and the rudimentary drives we share with all mammals, undergird all consciousness. Unawares, we feel or desire. After the fact (if at all), we rationalize our urges. The brain structures that move us or make us feel what we feel are more primitive than the newer, bigger parts of the human brain. Consciousness blossoms (if it blooms at all) atop a stew of unconscious drives and affects. Our affects are not rational. Nor do they necessarily nestle well with one another. Affects are what they are: sleep cycles, urges toward chemical homeostasis, fear, seeking, anger, lust, social bonding, play. All cavort upon our basal sense of existence in the world, which Panksepp identifies as a function of a deep brain fraction called the mesencephalic periaqueductal gray (MPAG). Such consciousness is the way of mammals. It is our way. If the human brain were a tree (a coppice, to be exact), its roots would plunge deep in the soil of the MPAG. Its several trunks erupt lightward through a dark subconscious forest, lofting the affects that our hypothalamic structures generate. Its leafy canopy undulates with higher neocortical processing. At the canopy apex, consciousness skips fitfully across a field of arboreal green, scarcely aware that the giant organism laboring below determines its topography. To return to the Hero-Villain epic, we choose this dualistic story because, when affects rage, no other tale comes to mind.

For the peacemaker, the coppice of consciousness, this metaphor for neuroanatomical subtleties, prescribes a path. People's brains tell that story their affects demand. Fearful, agitated persons shoehorn players into one of the Hero-Villain myth's hackneyed roles. Peacemakers evade this casting by distraction. We calm participants. We talk of banalities. We avoid coercion. We offer respect. We preserve dignity. We balance power. On good days, we settle storm-whipped affects. Then, occasionally, a wiser narrative sounds marginally plausible to combatants, a different story peopled by fewer ogres and princesses. Peace, occasionally, happens.

This is a true story. It seems unlikely, though, that I shall cease loving 24.

*(Brad Lancaster mediates and collaborates family, elder, and probate issues. He works with his spouse/paralegal, Kim, and little dog, Sofie, in Shoreline as Lancaster Law Office. Email: brad@lancasterlawoffice.com)*