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WEBERWOMAN'S WREVENGE TWENTY-SEVEN

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to the special anti-authoritarian issue of Wrevenge.

The inspiration for this issue came from several sources, thoughts about which have been rumbling around in my head for some time. I'll elaborate on the topics in the next few pages, but for starters here's the list:

* my grandparents' lives;
* my experiences last year before I left CSIRONET;
* recent Australian federal election;
* world events;
* worker/management confrontations;
* several sf books;
* proposed introduction of the 'Australia Card'.

EARLY INFLUENCES

My basic approach to authority started very early in life: Weber family myth has it that my first word was 'No' and my first sentence was 'You can't make me'.

This attitude was reinforced by early childhood role models. My father was a career Army officer, and tended to treat the children as if we were military subordinates. The closest to an answer he ever gave me to the question 'Why?' was 'Because I said so.' My mother, on the other hand, was more reasonable (and did not allow my father to get away with this behaviour with her), and her parents' lives were very different and much more attractive to me.

'Pop' Hollis (Grandpa to me) was a watercolor artist, specialising in seascapes and shorelines. He was reasonably well known in Baltimore art circles and had won various awards for his work. 'Mom' Hollis (Grandma) had been peripherally involved in art as well, but didn't seem to do much when I knew her.

During my childhood, they lived in an old farmhouse, subsisting largely on the barter economy: their vegetables and rabbits for others' eggs, fish, or milk. They had a small income from Grandpa's artwork, and Grandma did the occasional stint of typing or clerical work. But mostly they raised cocker spaniels for show, and rabbits and vegetables for eating, caught fish and mud crabs listened to a lot of baseball on the radio, read books, and generally enjoyed themselves.

They had a fierce independence, and were proud of the fact that they lived well (by their standards) without the necessity of ordinary jobs. Their contempt of government and politicians was frequently voiced, and the only laws they might have favoured were those against murder and theft. No doubt they regarded taxation as theft.

The main relevance of their lifestyle and worldview to me as a child was their general response to anyone telling them some activity was either forbidden or compulsory. They might even agree that the compulsory activity was desirable (wearing seat belts, for example) or the forbidden activity was to be condemned, but nobody was going to tell them what to do with their lives.

(For example, during the years of Prohibition, they were heavily involved in the speakeasy scene in Baltimore, and my mother tells me of her childhood experiences riding in a car full of illegal liquor, being driven from one city to another by my grandmother.)

At any rate, I grew up with a distinct dislike for authority, although at the same time I was very good at submitting to authority when it suited my purposes. For example, I was an excellent student and rarely in trouble for disobedience; I became skilled at baiting and harassing authoritarian teachers, but in such a way that they found it difficult to punish me.

Between the ages of about 15 and 25, I met a wide range of people whose approach to management (of a class, work subordinates, clubs, or sports teams) varied greatly. I learned that one could accomplish at least as good - and frequently better - results by the cooperative approach (and the force of a strong personality that one's subordinates respected) than by the authoritarian approach.

MY VIEW OF MANAGEMENT

My objection is not to leadership or management, but to the way it's handled. At one extreme is the fetish in some feminist groups for 'structurelessness' (no leader at all); at the other is a rigid hierarchy on the military model. Each of these has its place, but neither in my opinion is suitable - in the pure form - for many real life situations.

At work, for example, many recent studies have indicated - to no surprise to me - that people are happier, do better work, have fewer absences, etc, when they feel they are participating in the decision-making process. A skilled manager, given the chance, should help the workers feel part of a team. The team may very well choose, or accept, a leader to coordinate and oversee the team's work, but they should have the opportunity to contribute to the planning of that work.

The concept of the 'team' is often used to support the authoritarian model of management. The model is a sports team, in which each member must follow the group's strategy in order for the team to win: individual team members cannot do whatever they like or the 'teamwork' will be reduced to chaos. Fair enough, but there is no reason why such a team cannot jointly plan its strategy, and then all agree to the decisions of its leader during crisis (game) situations.

The workplace situation is no different. Why then should the 'team' so often be seen as an authoritarian model rather than a cooperative model? Surely good managers will learn from their team members, drawing upon the best in everyone's ideas and abilities, and evolving plans that utilise those strengths.

To me that's part of good management. Another part is the ability to resolve differences by non-confrontationist means. Granted, there will occasionally be times when no agreement can be reached, and someone has to give in to the other. But these times can be greatly minimised if the basic approach is cooperative - what the trendy management types call 'win-win'. You probably all known the basic ideas behind win-win, so I won't dwell on them here.

A major reason behind my leaving my former job was a trend over the past two years in that establishment away from cooperative to authoritarian management. This, I believe, was an over-reaction to a situation with a lot of built-in inefficiencies. The solution was seen as more management, rather than better management (certain senior people appeared to have the naive notion that more meant better).

When I interviewed for a management position, I was questioned about how I would handle certain situations. My answers were along the lines of what I've said above. It was clear from further questions, and the expressions on certain of the interviewers' faces, that my answers were the wrong ones. They wanted me to say I would be more authoritarian.

The person who got the job may have impressed them with his views, but he was unable to carry them through. He started off by devising an action plan for the documentation team. Good idea. But did he ask any of us who had actually been doing the work for the past several years? No. This did not make him popular with his staff, nor did it encourage us to be any more helpful and cooperative than absolutely necessary. His second conspicuous failing was to give us instructions, or correct us on errors, in an offensive manner. It is entirely possible to correct people's mistakes without being offensive about it, but he either didn't know how or wasn't willing to do so. This was an especially glaring fault when it was perfectly clear to us that we knew more about the job than he did. Respect him? No way. Obey him? Only enough to keep from being punished. Visions of high school and harassing the obnoxious teachers came to mind.

The end of that story came quickly: the subordinate staff resigned. The last I heard, after about 3 months the new manager had a nervous breakdown and went back to his old job. No one, including the organisation, benefited from this exercise in 'more management'.

AUSTRALIAN ELECTIONS

From managing staff at work to managing the state or the nation isn't that big a leap. It took me awhile to realise that the parliamentary system of government is even more hierarchical or authoritarian than the American system. I am reminded of the fact whenever there is an election.

You see, I have the naive notion that I should know something about the views of the person I'm voting for (or against, as the case may be). This is because I grew up under the American system, where the political party plays a quite different role than it does in the parliamentary system.

In Australia (and presumably in other countries with the parliamentary system), individuals elected as members of a given party have very little choice over how they vote: with a few exceptions (quaintly called 'conscience votes'), they must vote the party line or be disciplined - possibly including being expelled from the party.

Therefore, for the elector, it matters little who the person is; it's his or her party that's relevant. The party platform says all you need to know.

Not to me, it doesn't! As a person whose political training took place in California, I believe that participation is what democracy is all about. There is no sense of participation, however illusory, in Australian politics, except perhaps at the local level (unless one is a party member, and attends meetings regularly).

There is at least one political party in Australia that attempts to be more democratic, by involving its members directly in the formulation of party policies. Its name is, appropriately enough, the Australian Democrats. However, as far as I know, even they enforce party discipline on their elected representatives.

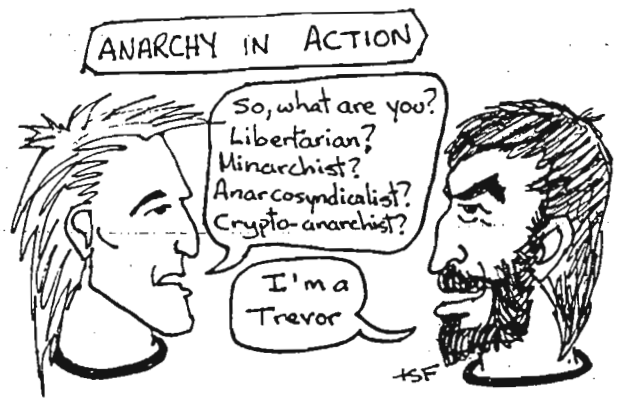
These thoughts were sparked by the recent (July 11) Federal elections, wherein I did not find out who the candidates in my new electorate were until one of the parties put a large advertisement in the newspaper, listing all the parties' candidates. Only one of the three parties standing a candidate in my electorate sent me any literature, and that was a request for a donation!

The only good thing I can say about such a system is that its election campaigns are mercifully brief - six weeks at most.

On the other hand, I love the Australian ballot. Is there anyone reading this who doesn't know that our elections are run under the preferential system, wherein one numbers the candidates in order of one's preference? The beauty of this system is that one can register a protest vote by giving, say, the Nuclear Disarmament Party one's first preference, without totally wasting one's vote - something one cannot do under the American system.

Now if someone would just devise a voting system that combined the best features of both...

Better still would be to replace representative 'democracy' with some other system entirely, but I'm not expecting to see that in my lifetime. And, if truth be told, the system I think is much better, is one I personally would find tedious in the extreme to live with (and find hard to imagine how it would work on a large scale). I am referring to the consensus or collective system.



DON'T LET THE BASTARDS WIN

Every now and then I hear a story which really warms my heart, even when the ending is sad. One such was told me by the 19-year-old daughter of a boating family in Queensland. The family makes its living running supplies to the tourist islands, fishing, charters, whatever. Friends and relatives work on the islands in various capacities. A year or so ago, one of the islands was sold to a corporation which was determined to modernise the operation.

Some of the new managers had a lot to learn. For example, one was adament that the supply boat must arrive at a given time each and every day, rather than at different times. The boat's skipper patiently explained about the tides. At low tide, you can't get a supply boat into this island. The city-bred manager was not impressed with this reason (he'd probably never heard of tides), but did eventually concede the point.

On other matters, however, he was not to be swayed. He wanted strict accounting of all supplies used. Fair enough, you may say, but I gather his approach was a bit offensive. The cook, for example, didn't use measuring cups. When asked for the recipe for fish batter, he listed (amongst other ingrediants) so many handfuls of flour. The manager, annoyed, insisted the measurements be in metric. So the cook carefully listed, so many metric handfuls of flour.

Meanwhile the other staff were being similarly pushed around. Another new rule forbid the staff who lived on the island from bringing in their own liquor supplies. They had to buy their grog at the company store (at prices rather higher than on the mainland). Their response was to quit drinking.

The sad part about this story is that the entire staff was sacked one day not long after, and given 24 hours to be off the island, with all their personal possessions. I admired their rebellion, though it was doomed from the start.

What's especially sad is that the new management probably had some excellent changes in mind, to cut costs and improve service, but they chose to be confrontationist rather than working with the locals. The 'show them who's boss' big stick mentality is self-defeating, I reckon. (That's why I so much enjoy books like A DOOR INTO OCEAN.)

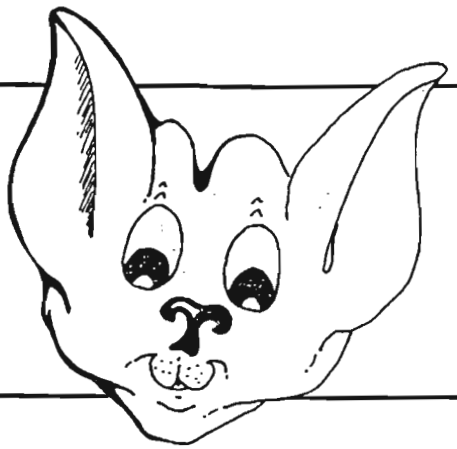
THE AUSTRALIA CARD

Which leads us to the Australia Card, an attempt to curb welfare and taxation cheating by issuing a compulsory identification card to all adult Australians. I'm not going into all the arguments here; my main objection is that I think it will fail to do what it's supposed to, but will be a potentially massive invasion of privacy for the law-abiding. I do not accept that the legal 'safeguards' will work, and even if they did, it's too easy to change the law.

I look forward to large-scale community non-cooperation, should this law be passed.

BOOK REVIEWS

by Jean Weber



A DOOR INTO OCEAN, by Joan Slonczewski, Women's Press, 1986.

I do enjoy reading about societies which function well using the consensus system, even when I know I'd hate spending all the time it often takes. One of those societies is depicted in Joan Slonczewski's A DOOR INTO OCEAN, which I encourage you to rush right out and read if you haven't already.

This marvelous book explores the interactions of individuals from two cultures with vastly different views of reality. It has certain aspects in common with the works of Ursula K LeGuin, but handles the material quite differently. The similarities are these: the action takes place on two planets considered 'moons' of each other, and the clash is between a collective, pacifist culture (Shora) and a dictatorial, militaristic one (Valedon).

Shora is a water planet, with no dry land at all. Its inhabitants, known as Sharers, come from the same basic genetic stock as the Valens, but 10,000 years of biotechnolocial development have changed them physically, and their uninterrupted cultural isolation has changed them psychologically.

All Sharers are female, have webbed hands and feet, and harbour symbiotic organisms in their skin which allow them to stay underwater for 15 minutes or so before needing to breathe. Their society is based upon consensus, and their language reflects their philosophy: humans share responsibility for what happens in their lives. No one does something to you; you and the other both 'share' what happens.

The Valens, not surprisingly, find this attitude incomprehensible. Even more incomprehensible to them is the Sharers' reaction when the Valens attempt to force them to do something. Sharers simply refuse to participate in being forced. They look upon the Valens as sick people, and try to help them. One way of helping them is refusing to do what they want, since what they want is clearly harmful to everyone. The Valens conclude that the Sharers have a deathwish. And around and around the misunderstandings go.

There's quite a bit of emphasis on language, since the concepts of one culture are difficult to express in the language of the other culture. Even when the same words are used, they have different meanings to the Sharers and the Valens. Some of the examples are delightful.

The reader sees the action mostly through the point of view of two Valens who live with the Sharers, and two of the Sharers. Many things are not explained, but inferred: an excellent touch, I thought. Alien cultures 'explained' quickly lose their alienness. And although the author's sympathies clearly lie with the Sharers, she has made both sides' worldviews compelling. I felt quite involved with the frustration they all had with each other: how can those people not understand?

I found this book so gripping that I stayed up hours past my usual bedtime to find out how this utterly irreconcilable situation would end.

NATIVE TONGUE II: THE JUDAS ROSE, by Suzette Haden Elgin, Daw, 1987.

By one of those happy synchronicities, this book also has a lot to do with language, and with ways around authoritarian people.

In NATIVE TONGUE, we were introduced to a society several hundred years in the future, in which women are legally totally subservient to men, and certain families train their children to be able to talk with aliens. All the men are very authoritarian towards the women, and the govenment has an authoritarian attitude towards everybody. Government officials definitely do not like the power of the linguists: if the latter ever went on strike, trade with the aliens would stop and the economy would collapse. The officials do not understand why the linguists do not exercise their power but instead work very hard (men, women and children) and seem to enjoy their hereditary task. The women of the linguist families, meanwhile, are busy developing a women's language and getting around the men's rules in all sorts of ways. The men, conditioned to think of women as silly, usually assist by not noticing what the women are really doing.

In this sequel, set another hundred years or so into the future, the women are busy spreading their language (Laaden) to women in the community at large. They don't deny they are doing this; in fact they obtain permission: but (amongst other tricks) they convince the men that what they are doing is so totally innocuous that the men don't try to stop them.

There are dozens of nice touches in this book. For example, the government men ask the linguist men to allow non-linguist children to be trained to talk to aliens. They are deeply suspicious when the linguists agree without even an argument, but it is years before the reasons

COMPUTER ALERT

My new home computer system comprises a 'Premier 286' (IBM AT clone) with the following features:

* 640K RAM
* 80286 processor running at 6/8 MHz
* 20 MB Miniscribe hard disk
* 360K Chinnon disk drive
* 1.2 MB disk drive
* DTC controller
* mono graphics card
* serial/parallel card
* licensed Phoenix BIOS
* power supply 180W
* Intra amber screen monitor
* AT format keyboard

This fanzine was produced using the MASS-11 word processing program (from Microsystems Engineering Corp, Illinois) and output on an Impact Systems Ltd LS800-IV laser printer (soon to be marketed in the United States and Europe under the Gestetner brand name) running in HP LaserJet Plus emulation mode. Alas, the printer is not mine.

The font used is Helvetica medium, in various point sizes; boxes and other fancy bits are done using the Impact Laser Command Language.

Illustrations were pasted in. The printing masters will be photocopied for distribution.

become apparent: children growing up in non-linguist families are unwilling to spend the long tedious hours as translators that linguist children do, and they are quite unco-operative as soon as they get old enough to realise that they can say no.

An even more delightful example is the problem of talking to whale-like aliens. For some reason, human children are unable to learn to speak to non-humanoid aliens. A government man gets this bright idea to have earthly whales taught whale-alien. He simply doesn't listen when he is told the fatal flaw in this plan: the whales (and the dolphins, porpoises, etc) have for centuries obstinately refused to talk to humans. You can just see the screaming frustration of the officials when this fact finally sinks in.

All of these examples make clear the point that when authoritarian types simply can not force someone to bow to their authority, they get very upset, poor things. Especially when those they wish to control are infuriatingly helpful and correct.

Elgin has a gift for heavy-handed sarcasm, which many people find a bit much. I happen to be among those who find it delightful, and kept laughing out loud on the train, causing people to glance at me nervously.

THE RAINBOW CADENZA, by J Neil Schulman, Avon, c 1983.

This libertarian novel is set in an America of the future, some time after several devastating wars which killed so many men that the sex ratio on earth is seriously imbalanced (around 7 men for each woman). Peace has been achieved, but one of the prices is the continuation of conscription - but for women, not men. Every healthy, able-bodied female must sign up at the age of 18 for 3 years of sexual duties in the government brothels, or be declared 'Touchable' and fair game for rape, murder, or whatever perversions turn men or women on.

If this idea offends you, but the conscription of young men to serve in the military (to 'keep the peace') doesn't, Schulman suggests you re-think your reasoning. He does a good job of presenting the arguments on both sides.

The novel focuses on one young woman who is determined not to be conscripted, but who does not want to emigrate to one of the space colonies and never return to earth. Her attitude is that her body is her property, not the state's, and how dare 'they' force her to do this?

She happens to be an extremely talented lasegrapher (practitioner of an art form using lasers), and has trained with some of the masters of the art. Some nice touches in this book are peripheral to the main action. For example, she argues with her instructor, who is a classical lasegrapher (using light only, without music) over the merits of roga, a musical form of lasegraphy.

Many aspects of the lives and technology of the people in this society are explored in this book. Schulman develops an all-too-realistic 'if this goes on' scenario and examines it from a civil-liberties point of view. A possible libertarian society (on one of the space stations) is briefly visited but is not explored in detail - I do hope he writes a book about it.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A TECHNICAL WRITER

by Jean Weber

Having recently acquired a new computer (see 'Computer Alert' box for more details), I am now able to work at home one or two days a week – at least in theory.

The reality is a bit more complicated. In order to work at home, I must have material upon which to be working. This material must be extracted from the engineers, by a process frequently resembling the children's game 'Twenty Questions'. The trick in technical writing, as in the game, is knowing which questions to ask.

The project I've been on for the past month is a pair of manuals (Users Guide and Reference Manual) for a new laser printer model. The engineers designing the software for this printer are probably very good at what they do, but typically useless at documentation. So part of my job each day, is to track them down in their lair and bully them for enough information for me to work on the rest of the day.

It does not help that our preferred hours of work do not exactly coincide. The best time to extract useful information from one of our engineers appears to be after 5 PM. I go home at 4:30.

The next-best time is when they arrive, between 9 and 10:30 am, sometimes later. The one I'm working with now fortunately comes in about 9:00. However, his brain cells do not seem to have fully awakened by then. This makes him easier to catch, but harder to get intelligent answers from him.

I arrive around 8:15 to 8:30 most mornings, giving me time for a leisurely cup of tea, a check of the plants, and some uninterrupted photocopying before many other show up. By 9:00 I'm lurking in the corridors, ready to pounce upon my victim with my latest page of questions, or merely a reminder that he or she promised me some material by yesterday evening, so where is it?

Part of my job is to suggest changes or improvements, if I think something is likely to be confusing to a naive user, or if I spot inconsistencies. A memorable recent series of conversations went like this:

(I am talking to the software engineer for a new machine.)

Me: Gil, which laser engine is this machine going to use?

Gil: The CX engine is the one we're designing it for.

Me: I thought all the CX's have been allocated to other machines.

Gil: So I've heard, but no one's told us to design it for the SX.

(I trek upstairs to consult Gil's supervisor.)

Me: Ray, which laser engine is this machine going to use?

Ray: It hasn't been decided yet.

Me: It's rather hard to write a user manual when I don't know what machine I'm writing it about. Half the manual is about the hardware. You're only concerned with the software half, but I've got to write the whole thing. And preferably not all at the last minute. Perhaps you could find out?

(A few days later, Ray confirms the printer will use the SX hardware.)

Me: Gil, since the printer is using the SX hardware...

Gil: No one's told me that.

(I trek upstairs again.)

Me: Ray, Gil says no one's told him it will use the SX.

Ray: Yes I have told him. He just doesn't listen.

Me: (sounds of gnashing teeth) Can we sort this out, please, so I can get some sensible answers out of Gil?

(We go downstairs and Ray explains to Gil what the situation is. Ray leaves.)

Me: Gil, since the printer is using the SX hardware, certain software menu items are different from what you've given me. (I proceed to enlighten him, and he goes off to change them.)

Another fun day was when I finally got a chance to sit down with a working test model of the software and see if it corresponded to the written information Gil had given me. (It never does, no matter who is doing the work.)

Me: Hey, Gil, where's the Emulation Menu?

Gil: It should be there.

Me: I know it should be there, but it isn't. Come see for yourself. (I demonstrate.)

Gil: (turning to colleague) David, what happened to the Emulation Menu?

David: It's probably hidden. Wait, I'll push this switch...

Me: Yes, it's there now. But the user can't reach that switch, and shouldn't need to. Someone has to restore the menu so it can be used.

David: I'll write a memo.

Me: Now, how about this Interface Menu? That shouldn't be there, but it is.

(Conversation continues.)

Once I've collected some useful information, or cleared up some point of confusion, I carry the results back to the office to digest. Part of my time is spent turning jumbled and cryptic notes into English and putting them all into some

semblence of order. Then I put in the commands for headings, page layout etc and print the drafts on the laser printer. The formatting stage is sometimes rather time consuming and tedious, once I've done the initial design work and know how to get it to look the way I want. It's also stuff which can easily and conveniently be done at home, except for the printing.

When I have a full draft of a manual, 4 or 5 copies are made and distributed to various senior people for review. Is anyone surprised to learn that the swiftness of response is inversely proportional to the importance of the person involved? It does no good to say to the Director that his comments will be ignored if they come back late - that is not one of the choices! So I nag everybody until I get the copies back, correct the factual errors, ignore the opinions I don't agree with, and produce a final version.

About this point, either an engineer or a marketing person changes something. Something very *minor*, but which causes hideous repercussions in the manual. For example, adding or subtracting one page in a spot where I can't easily fudge the results but instead have to reprint all the following pages which are now renumbered. This is particularly annoying when illustrations are involved, which brings me to one of the wonderful Catch-22's of the desktop publishing world.

There are two ways to put an illustration in a computer-generated manual. One is to have the illustration in an electronic form so it prints out in its proper place in the text. The other is to do it the old-fashioned way and paste the illustrations into spaces left in the printed text. The catch is that the new electronic way often means that a page takes 5 or 10 minutes (or more) to print, on a printer that generates 8 pages a minute without illustrations. When one is printing a 100-page file, this is rather slow. Ironically, it's often faster to paste in the drawings.

Oh yes, there are ways around this problem (mainly involving using one computer to print a file while working on a different file on a second computer), but we don't happen to have the equipment where I work.

Still, it's interesting. I've been surprised how much I understand when the engineers explain things to me. I have no background in computing, electronic engineering, or anything related, but obviously my time at CSIRONET (and around Eric Lindsay) has taught me a lot of the jargon, at least.

Illustrations by: Sheryl Birkhead, cover, p 4; Terry Frost, pp 2,3; Bill Rotsler, p 6; Julie Vaux, p 5.

The Rabbit's Progress

by Lyn McConchie