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How Would 21st Century Hawaii Treat Harrison Bergeron?

By Rev. Daniel P. de Gracia, II, 11/5/2007 10:28:51 AM

Fifteen years ago when I was a student at Kitty Hawk Middle School in Converse, Texas, part of my required reading was a certain short story and tale of martyrdom called *Harrison Bergeron*, written by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Originally written in 1961 for Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine, the world of Harrison Bergeron is set in the year 2081 where America has a whopping 213 or more amendments to the U.S. Constitution, the last three of which set the provisions for absolute equality through mediocrity and the establishment of the Office of U.S. Handicapper General. For the Americans of that epoch, Vonnegut writes: "They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else.

Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else." People with beautiful faces are made to wear ugly masks, people with graceful movement are made to wear sacks filled with ballast to slow them down, and intellectuals are forced to wear devices that handicaps their brains.

The people of 2081 are intentionally handicapped by the government so as not to exceed one another; the greater your gifts are, the greater the government handicaps. It is in this world that we learn of imprisoned Harrison Bergeron, a 14-year-old son of George and Hazel Bergeron, whose appearance is "Halloween and hardware" from the ridiculous encumbrances that government has placed on him for his exceptional physique, intellect, and charisma. Even his teeth, which are pearly white, are capped with black so as not to exceed others.

But refusing to live a life limited by someone else, Harrison breaks out jail and into a television studio filming ballerinas, strips his mandatory handicaps off, and declares a coup against the U.S. Government, nominating himself as Emperor. Harrison offers that the first woman to rise stand in agreement with him shall be Queen, at which point in time a single ballerina rises to be freed of all her encumbrances.

It as a literary moment of incredible joy: two Americans, knowing their potential, refuse to be restricted, and remove their handicaps on national television before a watching audience that includes Harrison's parents, George and Hazel. The spectacle of freedom causes others to take their own handicaps on, and it looks as though America is about to be free, once again.

Unfortunately, the revolution is short lived, because the U.S. Handicapper General comes into the studio, guns down the rebels, and once again, the government reigns. Of most tragic irony is the fact that George Bergeron, father of slain Harrison, sees his son die but later cannot remember that anything even happened because the government handicaps attached to his brain distract him, and so, the story ends right where it started with everything lost and nothing gained.

The world of Harrison Bergeron is what some political scientists call an anti-utopia: a society with good intentions yet extremely bad means of accomplishing them, leading to a perverse and unbearable world. And here in Hawaii, we have the blessing of extremely great intentions. Consider for a moment the kokua our residents have for the environment, the various ethnic groups, even our history and legacy.

I think even the most detached observer would have to admit that our people are some of the most loving, warm-hearted, passionate, and religious citizens in the world. But where we fall short is our implementation and execution of these intentions. Lately, Hawaii is becoming an extremely bad place to live, work, and play. I do not say this in condemnation, but in love: we have become, my dear friends, an anti-paradise where we have left nothing for our future generations to inherit but debt, crisis, and dwindling opportunity for success.

As a Christian, one of the tenets of my faith is what St. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:14: "Children are not duty bound to lay up store for their parents, but parents for their children." To the layman, it means simply that our calling in life is to give our children a future worth living. We need to come to our senses, recognize the flawed implementations of our anti-paradise, and begin the change before its too late. If you would, lend me your eyes and hearts long enough to consider a few of these.

Tax And Spend Philosophy

One of the most disturbing attitudes we have developed over the years is the idea that the solution to every problem in the State of Hawaii is to collect more money from the taxpayer and make more appropriations for a government agency to solve it.

Don't believe it? According to a recent September 2007 article by the Economist Magazine, Hawaii has America's second-highest state tax burden, and doing business is 16 percent more costly than the next most expensive state, New York. Just check out the number of bills that get referred to the House Committee on Finance when the Legislature is in session, and you will see that our elected officials have a propensity for making decisions that impact your pocketbook.

Oh sure, the first thing that any elected official will tell you is, "We had to spend it! How else are we going to air condition the schools, pay the teachers, build the roads, gas the buses, and run the government?" but our tax system is getting to the point where we are oppressing people who as it is don't make enough money to get by. I had the unnerving opportunity to hear a certain public servant when asked how we ought to fund a proposed program say, "Let's tax the shit out of tourists: if they want to come here, then they're going to have to pay the social fee."

When I hear things like that, I am less offended and more terrified at the direction we are going. Does it really make sense that a person living in Kaneohe should pay for a rail system that they haven't even had the opportunity to vote on, that won't even course through their area? Does it really make sense that, just for the sake of "having" an island ferry, we subsidize \$74.00 per rider for our consciences to be cool enough to say "we supported alternative transportation"?

Does it really make sense to keep increasing the gas tax and yet complain that present funding isn't enough and we need emergency appropriation to pay for school buses? Does it really make sense that widening a very short stretch of public roadway with minimal lanes should cost \$59 million dollars? (And just for comparison, the U.S. Air Force's F-117A stealth fighter was initially purchased in 1983 for \$45 million, and that uses more than just paint and asphalt.)

No business could possibly operate on the model of governance the City and County of Honolulu or the state of Hawaii uses and still be competitive; if anything, a corporation's Board of Directors would fire CEOs and division directors who behaved like our public servants. We need to stop draining the blood from our ohana through oppressive taxes that fund unnecessary programs.

Part of this philosophy comes from the belief that we'll always have people able to pay, and another part of it comes from the self-corrupting aspect of our present system of democratic representation which forces public servants (especially those with two year terms) to consistently deliver pork so that their campaign mail-outs can say, "I provided such-and-such millions for such-and-such project."

So the "pork" which our elected officials deliver us each year (or perhaps, since this is Hawaii, we ought to call it "Kalua Pig") is delivered at the expense of you and me. It's almost like taking a blood transfusion from your right arm to your left, but letting most of it drip out on the way. My friends, this should not be so. While some taxes are indeed necessary, expending ridiculous amounts of our money (and requiring more the next fiscal year) is not.

"Pono Or Else There Will Be Pilikia"

The other problem we have is an unrealistic, perfectionist attitude which holds excessive fear of everything: fear of dogs living in junkyards, fear of ships hitting whales, fear of invasive species, fear of a mainland company doing things more efficiently and taking away local jobs, fear of people stealing rocks, fear of tourists, fear of native Hawaiians, fear of condominiums, even fear of taking pork products over the Pali.

We have become so tightly wrapped, so insular minded, so dominated by out of control special interest, so paranoid of everything that we have law upon law upon law that makes life absolutely unbearable. I like what Rep. Gene Ward (R, District 17) said during a Floor speech regarding the Superferry: "What started out as a ride to neighbor islands has become a car wash." Like Harrison Bergeron, our excessive fear of everything has caused us to put unnecessary burdens on everything and everyone.

We are penalizing innovation, hope, and the entrepreneurial spirit, things that are at the heart of what makes America great. We don't need to regulate everything, some things should just be left alone. Regulation does not translate to righteousness -- that's just legalism. Like Vonnegut's world of Harrison Bergeron and its 213 amendments to the U.S. Constitution, we are passing too many laws for ridiculous things.

We need to learn to stop being afraid and learn to start living by faith with one another, for one another. Just a few days ago, one of my friends was threatened by a Kauai resident because of his love for playing golf on neighbor islands. "We don't want your kind here," the man told my friend, "you city-dweller, you golf player, you who hang out in country clubs -- what are you, anyways, a Republican?" That kind of attitude is anathema to our success as "one nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all" as our Pledge of Allegiance demands.

Benjamin Franklin said, "We must hang together, gentlemen ... else, we shall most assuredly hang separately." Stop being afraid! Learn to do something different and embrace different people now and then. You'll discover that at the end of the day, we have more in common than our outward appearances project.

Lack Of Strategic Insight And Planning

I can't believe that people would actually wear shirts or put a sticker on their automobile that actually says "Ainokea" (a portmanteau of "I don't care") and be proud of that kind of attitude. But in fact, the "Ainokea" attitude is something that we see manifesting in all levels of our society, especially in government. I call it a lack of strategic insight, and it is something that is killing our future generations.

We have invested so much in the temporary desires of the moment that we have literally nothing left for tomorrow. "Hawaii 2050" will not be a nice place as some would have you believe. If current trends hold true, Hawaii 2050 look less like the sterile, spin controlled propaganda our politicians paint and more like the "evil future" we all heartily laugh at in movies like *Back To The Future* and *The Terminator*.

We will have rampant drug use; out of control homelessness and ridiculous cost of living; our cars will be backed up in every street and highway; we will have a rail system covered in graffiti that smells like vomit and urine; there will be desperate, lonely, and embittered citizenry who will have no self-control, no propensity for discipline, and at best, a legalistic view of citizenship that seeks to avoid responsibility.

Not to mention governing such a state and such a people will require more police officers, armed with more than just pistols and clubs, and they will need mayors and a governor who will borderline totalitarianism (unruly, hopeless people are always ruled by brutal leaders). And in that terrible end of democracy, freedom, aloha, and pono, no one will ever remember how in 2007 we fast tracked ideas and policies which served the moment but didn't lend to the future.

I write all these things not to terrify or alarm but to demonstrate that without a change in course, we are headed for a future that will be bleak. We have to change ourselves and our leaders, NOW. We, the democratic peoples of Hawaii, need to say that enough is enough and that we are going to build a world worth living in. Shakespeare's Hamlet tells us, "What is a man, if his chief good and market of his time be but to sleep and feed ... sure, He that made us with such large discourse, looking before and after, gave us not that capability and god-like reason to fust in us unused."

My fellow friends and ohana, let us invest in one another and invest in the future. God doesn't give people things He doesn't want them to use, and He gave us the power to live in prosperity and peace with one another. Stop handicapping yourselves and one another. There are many young people who, like Harrison Bergeron, are unwilling to accept limitations and unwilling to compromise, but our society is killing them. It is time for this to stop.

Freedom begins with people who are willing to destroy the yoke of bondage. Please Hawaii, if we're going to protest, let's protest against the ideas, attitudes, and habits that are killing our future.

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