

## ***Y2 KAOS***

**By Michael Ventura**

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The chaos isn't in the machines, it's in us. Whether the Y2K phenomenon will be remembered for disasters or mere snafus, no one could have invented a more perfect metaphor for our passage into the year 2000. Computers define our epoch. Our culture and economy depend upon the ability of these machines to communicate with each other -- so much so, that this constant electronic conversation is viewed as more important than our individual inability to talk with and face each other. What amounts to no more than our collective inattention, a lack that could have been remedied easily 20 years ago (the inability of many computers to accurately read and assess the date "2000"), is going to cause serious problems, and possibly disasters, at the very moment that we enter the next Millennium. So: It is more important for our machines to talk to each other than for *us* to talk to each other. That's *really* the Millennium.

Billions of dollars worldwide are being spent on getting the machines to talk to each other coherently in the year 2000 (the same billions that we never seem to have when it's a question of feeding and educating the destitute and abandoned), while everywhere we're fighting ethnic wars, culture wars, gender wars, so many wars at once, wars fought because we don't know how to talk to each other. It can make you embarrassed, even ashamed, to be a human being. And that collective weight of individually unadmitted shame is the Millennium.

There is no school of thought that I know of that addresses the individual's deep shame over our collective state. Instead, our public discourse insists on maintaining (though we lack the courage to state the assumption plainly) that an individual can find peace as part of a crazed and fragmented humanity -- no matter how madly humanity as a whole behaves. Meanwhile the ozone and the rainforests disappear; the seas are diseased, and the polar caps are melting; and many more marvelous creatures will be extinct by the time our children reach our age; the mean temperature of the globe is increasing, the weather patterns are mad; and the governments and corporations make noises about it all but don't do anything about it, because to do something about it would cost many billions (though the billions it costs to fix our machines don't seem a deterrent to *that* project); and it may be too late to do anything anyway -- and that's the Millennium in which Western culture tells us we can achieve individual peace of mind. An assumption that is, itself, madness.

The Millennium is also a lot of rotten memories. The worst memories that any century has ever had to live with. Auschwitz. Hiroshima. Cambodia and the Cultural Revolution and Stalin's purges and Rwanda and on and on -- millions killed or ruined or enslaved for no more than somebody else's idea of how they ought or ought not to live. Or that's the rationalization anyway. More truly: They died, and continue to die, or were and are made to live a kind of death, because of the seemingly ineradicable human compulsion to deny that the Other is as human as I, as legitimate an expression of Creation as I -- a compulsion that no religion, science, philosophy, psychology, or level of prosperity, has ever managed to salve, much less solve. (And yet we think we've advanced. To what? From what?) So many shameful memories. So much dead weight to drag into the next Millennium, a Millennium already so twisted with the sins that created

it, so tainted with its own history, that, no matter the innovations, it is not possible for the future to be truly "new." The sins of the fathers and mothers will be visited upon the daughters and sons -- and primary among them are the sins of complaisance, inattention, and cowardice. (As James Baldwin said, the Nazis didn't do their filthy deeds because most Germans were evil, but because most Germans were spineless. The same is true of racism in America and everywhere.) So the year 2000 looms as a gateway through which all of history must now pass, dragging behind all that has come before -- and because of this, we face a future that we are seeking to escape even before we reach it.

The phrase "the year 2000" draws a kind of blank in our imaginations, because we know that we will be exactly the same on 1/1/00 -- the same, yet different too, because there will no longer be "the year 2000" to look forward to and we will have to admit that the present *is* the future.

On the last night of this century, this Millennium, we'll shoot off our fireworks and get drunk and swear our love to people we love and people we don't; we'll laugh and cry and stare into the sky for portents; we'll sing "Auld Lang Syne" knowing that one day we, too, will be forgot and never brought to mind -- and when the hoopla is over *we will not have changed*. For, except for a few million women and gays (mostly affluent and white) enjoying more liberty in a few Western countries, and except for one nation (South Africa, of all places) uncompromisingly striving for racial justice, I defy (and welcome) anyone to prove a structural shift, much less an evolution, in human consciousness. And even those changes (not to mention the endless faddish things we call "change") are supported by an affluence that is, in turn, dependent upon a corporatism that is raping the earth and causing economic chaos in most of the world. And few will admit their sadness and shame at trying so hard, as individuals and as a race, to improve ourselves *in the depths of our souls*, and failing so miserably.

We made so many new things, we fashioned so many new concepts, and we let those things and concepts both cause and excuse a century of monstrous behavior, and we called this progress, we called this change. But the integrity and compassion and depth of our behavior has not changed.

Yes, it seems an obvious point, but it's the entire point. It is the very meaning of our time, the condition and parameter of daily life. It is what every last one of us must live with.

In the new Millennium, the human soul will still be a throbbing paradox of equal parts violence and tenderness, striving to express itself without the least idea of the true content and consequences of its expression -- and we will yet hope! Not for any pretty or fancy reason, but because we can't help it: We'll hope because we hope. The same way we laugh and fuck and sing and kill and pray. Because we do. And we'll endlessly analyze how and why we do. We'll generate endless books and spiels and theories, and every so often the theories will shift, the old theories will seem antique and the new ones will seem right on, until the theories shift again (though our behavior will not) -- because we do *that*, too, and always will, until we are no more. And there's a kind of glory in this crazed damned spectacle -- in its very relentlessness, if nothing else -- and that glory is the Millennium as much as anything else.

So we are, like all who came before us, buffeted by forces beyond our control and even beyond our comprehension; we are, like all who came before us, both fed and eaten by the era that's created us; and much of what we call our autonomy is merely part of a mass reaction to the instinctual migration through Time that we call "history." But, for all that, we are not passive. Like electrons that are, at one and the same moment,

individually behaving particles and collectively behaving waves, our autonomy is not merely an illusion; it is made up of a thousand choices that each of us initiates every day, nervy particles of humanity going every which way unpredictably, by hook or by crook or both, and, most of all, by a wounded and ennobled act of choice. When any of us asks or longs for help (be that help from friend or therapist or priest or God or of some latent strength within ourselves) what are we really asking but that our capacity for choice be healed and strengthened -- that it not be merely a reaction to our society's compulsions?

Well -- as you can see, I'm more than a little shaken by what may be no more than a date on my calendar. I feel, quite desperately, that by now I ought to know something that I, quite obviously, don't know. And I feel, perhaps unfairly, that we *all* ought to. We are all entrusted, at birth, whether we want it not, with what we can carry of the human heritage. And this may be the heaviness that each of us feels -- something so much heavier than our little lives -- in our darkest hours. We look down at our hands. They are empty. And that may be good -- we have a choice about what they reach for next. They ask of us, "Give me something useful to do, something that will matter." It is the same question every day, and how we answer it *is* our lives, and makes history. And in that sense New Year's Day, 2000, will truly be like any other day.

*(To be continued -- a version of this piece appears in the Family Therapy Networker.)*

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