

Grendel and War

One night my wife and I were sitting out on the balcony admiring the splendid panorama of stars. We had visited an orphanage during the day, playing with the older babies and cuddling the new ones.

Taking a sip of Chardonnay, my wife said, "I love babies, don't you?"

"Yeah," I said. "I think babies are very cool people."

"When you look into their eyes and they look back, sometimes smiling, sometimes making little baby noises, looking so wise. I sometimes wonder if they know a lot but just aren't able to communicate with us."

"Interesting," I acknowledged. "Like Grendel. I held him for over an hour, threw him up and caught him to hear him squeal. Then we just sat under the tree and looked at each other. Beautiful little guy!!!"

That night I thought about what my wife said. I dreamed of Grendel.

In my dream, I was in the laboratory of my friend, Melvin, who is considered one of the finest physicists in the world. I asked him if it was possible to design a machine that could read babies' minds, a kind of telepathic automata.

He smiled knowingly. "I'm sure this is just an amazing coincidence but I've been experimenting with just such a concept. The machine is still in the prototype stage but it seems to work in the right direction. From my experiments, babies seem to be born with an amazing amount of knowledge. Unfortunately, for some reason I haven't been able to determine, they gradually lose it as they grow. By the time can talk they have forgotten almost everything."

The machine could actually communicate with them, he explained. Unfortunately the brain waves were random and the machine had many limitations at this stage. Subjects couldn't be dialed up by subject matter, for example. Melvin eavesdropped on this baby down the hall and was lucky enough to catch the unified field theory going on. "Eureka! A Nobel prize in Physics!" he yelled in triumph, wakening the baby. There was a small glitch,

however. Math was involved that hadn't been invented yet. The machine couldn't time-line things, so for all Melvin knew, the new math was a thousand years off.

I asked if I could try one. He said I could if I was quiet and didn't upset the baby. So we went to the orphanage and borrowed Grendel for awhile. Grendel was fast asleep when Melvin hooked up the machine to his wee cerebellum with electrodes.

I put on the headphones and listened. At first it sounded like gibberish. Melvin said that Grendel's thought language was in Urdu so I would have to wait for an English item. Pretty soon, Grendel rolled over and started thinking in my language. He was going through the methodology of war prevention. "Eureka! A Nobel Peace Prize!" I yelled in my thoughts so as not to startle him.

Inside my head I heard, "Hi, Don."

"Hi, Grendel," I said. "You know my name?"

"I know a lot, Don, and you play with me every week. You are so much fun!"

"Thanks, Grendel. You're fun too! Tell me, is it true that you know everything?"

"Yeah, mostly everything. When I was born I really did know everything, but I'm 16 days old now, so I've forgotten 16 days worth of everything. That's not much to forget, though. Assuming I learn to talk by 4 years old and will have forgotten everything, that is only one tenth of one percent."

"Can you tell me the answer to something that everybody wants to know but so far nobody has a clue?"

"Probably," Grendel's brain said.

"Can you tell me how to prevent war?"

Grendel's brain paused. "There are a lot of ways, Don. One way is to wait around two million years for our species to grow up. Somewhere along the way we will learn that war is bad for everything, so we'll stop. Unfortunately we might not make it that long at our current rate. Barring evolutionary leaps, there is a practical way to prevent wars,"

“Really?” I asked, amazed. “We could really prevent wars?”

“Sure. But if you get a Nobel Peace Prize, I expect attribution. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” I said. “Your name came from someone in literature that was a famous warrior, so I wouldn’t dare cross you. So tell me about war.”

“Okay,” he said, gurgling, playing with his toes. “By the way, Beowulf was a pussy in actual fact. Anyway, it is easy to prevent wars. The answer has been right in front of your noses for millennia. Watch doggies.”

“Dogs?” I asked, completely perplexed.

“Dogs never have wars. Do you know why?”

“No,” I said defensively.

“Well, unless they are trained against their nature, they smell each other’s butts, wag their tails and are friends for life.”

“Uh, huh,” I said. “So?”

“Tell everyone at the United Nations that they need to smell each other’s butts and wag them a little. Then they will be friends for life and role models for the world. Soon everyone will be smelling and wagging and there will be no more wars.”

The machine began to groan, then turned off. I looked at Grendel who had just gone back to sleep with a big smile on his face. “I love you, Grendel,” I said in my dream. “But maybe you don’t know *everything*. I’m afraid the species isn’t up to this fine idea yet. There are too many assholes!”

Then I woke up with a smile on my face too. “Babies are cool people.” I said quietly.