

When There Are Too Many Stupid People

It's hard to get through a day without coming up against several stupid people. They trigger for road rage. Find the home site of author Bill Allin at <http://billallin.com>

Not ignorance, but ignorance of ignorance, is the death of knowledge.
- Alfred North Whitehead, mathematician and philosopher (1861-1947)

Sometimes it's hard to tell if knowledge is dead and buried or if it's alive and well, toiling in laboratories, libraries and offices all over the world.

Knowledge may be summed up as facts we can use. Trivia that has value only on quiz shows and in party games wouldn't be considered knowledge because you can't actually do anything with it. A nonfiction book sitting on a shelf is not knowledge, in itself, because without a person to do something with it, it has no lasting value.

The sum of human knowledge doubles about every 15 years now. In the days of the ancient Greeks, who were known for their wisdom and knowledge, the sum of human knowledge varied little from one year to the next. So as a person got older, he or she could learn a greater portion of the available knowledge, thus gaining wisdom in the process.

Today, people who know a great deal are considered freaks, geeks, specialists or people who should be avoided because they may be dangerous. Dangerous? Adults who know very little tend to be suspicious of, if not actually fear, others who know lots.

Why? Humans are still in our infancy in terms of social development, even if we are well into our midlife technologically. We still function, as societies, much the way our prehistoric ancestors did when they were part of a tribe. Though we have grown beyond the optimum size of a tribe in most communities and cultures, our social system has not advanced with our population. We still think in tribal ways, to some extent.

People who are knowledgeable on a variety of subjects tend to be feared as if they were part of a visiting tribe. We all understand physical strength, agility and ability with weapons. We don't understand what a person with a huge library of information between his ears could do. Likely nothing, but we aren't certain. Could he be dangerous and we wouldn't even know it?

Wisdom today has much less to do with absorbing information we are able to use and more to do with the ability to see beyond the problems of the moment to solutions that are not evident to most people. It's being able to find answers while others are still trying to figure out the problem.

Wisdom and knowledge today may be more rare among educated people than in the ancient past (slaves and peasants were always kept ignorant and illiterate) because too many of us believe we know what we are doing when in fact we haven't a clue. Too many of us believe we can buy our way out of any problem we can't manage ourselves and we're shocked when we can't.

Personal relationships show excellent examples of this. While there are many reasons why relationships fail, one is that many people have never asked what the other person in the relationship wanted from them. They assume that if they are together, they must be providing what the other wants. They buy their way through a divorce because they don't understand each other. Never tried. Didn't know they should.

While I can't believe Whitehead's assertion that knowledge will die because so many people are not aware of how little knowledge they have and how little ability they have to find the answers and solutions they require, this deficit is nonetheless huge and is having an unpleasant impact on many societies.

Not knowing something we need to know is one thing, especially if we know how to find what we need. Not realizing how clueless we are about so many things is dangerous because these people often don't abide by the rules of society. This includes such things as not following speed limits on the roads, taking drugs that we have no idea how they will react with our particular metabolism and wasting fuel in our cars while we watch the prices soar.

Bring to someone's attention that they are not following one of these rules of society or that they should be doing something differently because the way they are doing it might cause them grief and they react with hubris and arrogance. How dare we! Those who try to help clueless others are treated as if they were muggers.

There's nothing shameful about not knowing something. What is shameful is to deny it, to cover it up and to not take the trouble to find out.

There's nothing pretty about ignorance. It's not funny either. Strange that it's so popular.

Bill Allin

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