

How We're Rippling Our Way to Tyranny

One of the favorite pastimes of my often competitive family growing up was seeing who could get the most "skips" from a stone thrown into the low-tide waters at the beach. This is a game that, as anyone who has played it knows, places a great deal of emphasis on correctly choosing the right rocks.

We would all, of course, work on getting as low and flat as we could in the sidearm deliveries of our payloads. But I knew that all that technique could be vitiated by the choice of insufficiently smooth and flattened stones. Hence, I always spent an inordinate amount of time choosing the elements of my arsenal.

Those twilight searches for just the right "skimmer" stimulated in me a lifelong fascination with the incremental power of waters, tides, and repetitive motions, of how small but constant assaults on even the most seemingly resistant matter can alter it, and how, if you listened hard enough to the clacking of the wave-jostled stones at the tideline, you could bear witness to the existence of these slow-motion, but deeply significant, processes of change.

There is a major paradox at the heart of the human condition, one we seldom admit or address frontally. It is the fact that even as we know on some level, as [Mercedes Sosa sang so beautifully and movingly, that "Everything Changes,"](#) we constantly and vainly seek to arrest the passage of time on our way to that fateful final day by pretending, for example, that the house we dutifully tidy up every night will be exactly the same as the one we wake to in the morning, even though such an outcome is, from the point of view of both physics and biology, flatly impossible.

In short, we love the familiar because it makes us feel, however falsely, that we've managed to temporarily outsmart the dictatorship of time with its accompanying quotients of existential angst.

It is precisely, and paradoxically, this same proclivity for ritual-making that makes our species enormously adaptable. Like all animals, we tend initially to respond quite negatively to brusque changes in our vital circumstances. But once that initial shock passes, we are very good at forgetting the discomfort evoked and getting on with the game of fortifying the illusion that life goes on pretty much as it had before through the repetition of new daily dances.

A pretty good thing. Right?

Well, "yes" and "no."

A lot depends on who is authoring the rituals.

When we and/or those we love and trust are the authors of such daily habits, the results are generally pretty positive. And that's for a simple reason: the things we choose to do repetitively in such contexts generally grow out of our own or our small group's *organic* ways of viewing the world. And because they affect only a limited number of people they can be altered or abandoned as soon their lack of utility becomes apparent to the individual, or a plurality of the group that has subscribed to them.

Rituals imposed through edicts issued from on high are, however, an entirely different matter.

Powerful elites are ever attentive to the psychological quirks of the many whose life energies they so often seek to both exploit and control. They long ago took note of the enormous human adaptability to new rituals and how this can be used to place habits amenable to *their* goals "between" the common person and his or her more natural reflexes.

Organized religions have long accrued secular power through such means. And as religion began to lose its hold on the masses in the 19th century, [movements of national identity \(pp. 15-28\)](#) and then [revolutions based on class analyses](#) recurred to the very same top-down ritual-creation techniques to enforce social solidarity among the common people.

Our current post-national and post-revolutionary elites have, as is their wont, done their due diligence on these earlier regimes of social control and have detected in them an important flaw of approach: they eventually lost their effectiveness because their ritual implementation techniques tended to be far too in-your-face for far too long.

Their considered answer?

Shake 'em, break 'em, and then caress them into "Sure, anything you say;" that is, hit them with a massive disorienting dose of new habits, back off, pretending to have given up on the effort, then microdose the now exhausted and wincing rubes—wishing nothing more than not to be whacked again—into banal compliance.

I was reminded of all this by what I saw on my recent trip home to the US from a nearby foreign country.

Some years ago, the US government began demanding, through a so-called "pilot program" that foreign visitors to the United States allow the collection of their biometric data at the border, first in the form of fingerprints and later in through the modality of facial scanning.

It was initially made quite clear that this only applied to foreigners, as only they were asked by the border guard to place their hands on the fingerprint scanner and or state into the facial scanning equipment.

Moreover, I knew from my reading that US citizens were exempt from such processes and was pretty sure (this may have

changed) that even the requirement that foreigners submit to the facial recognition technology had been challenged by civil rights groups to such an extent that the Biden administration had abandoned their attempts to make the practice permanent and binding through the promulgation of a permanent federal rule.

So, what did I see a few weeks back?

I saw the US border agents demanding, with the bored but intimidating self-assurance with which the manager of a restaurant demands his employees wash their hands before returning to the kitchen, that every US citizen stands in front of the facial recognition camera. And looking around I saw no sign advising me or anyone else that this stealing of our unique personal markers was completely optional.

When it was my turn at the counter, the agent read my passport and gestured as he had with all of the other US citizens that had gone before me toward the camera, at which point I said "Isn't this optional?" To which he replied with a curt "Yes" followed a short time later by a none-too-friendly "Ah, so, you want to do this the hard way?"

Hoping he could intimidate me further, he called over the shift supervisor and said "He doesn't want to be scanned. What should I do?", at which point the supervisor, dashing his underling's hopes of playing the tough guy, looked at me kindly and said "Just look at his passport picture and make sure it matches his face." And away I went.

More depressing than the attempts of the uniformed lackey to intimidate me into compliance was the carefree insouciance with which the 30 or so others that had preceded me to the counter moved with alacrity to comply with the non-required requirement, with many even fixing their hair to ensure that they would eternally look their best in the government archives that are used, increasingly, to cross-check their

every daily action, and, if the [blue caps](#) and their commissars get their way with the implementation of their proposed doctrine of “cognitive security,” their every thought as well.

Returning overseas a few days later, I was sitting in my uncomfortable chair at the terminal gate when the airline employee at the desk announced the commencement of the boarding process and explained that first they would check our tickets and our passports and then we would turn to our right and have our faces scanned by facial recognition technology before going down the chute.

Again, there was nothing said or indicated about this being an optional procedure. And again, I watched my fellow passengers all snap to with barely suppressed enthusiasm to the information dictates of not even the government, but a massive corporate entity.

And it was then that my mind was suddenly cast back to the sights and the sounds of those rocks and pebbles being ground down to smoothness and minimal surface tension by the waxing and waning of the waves at the tideline.

We’ve become, through a series of coercions and inducements forced on us by the government since 2001, and made banal through cult-like invocations and rituals, a nation of first-class “skimmers” there for the taking by anyone who feels like tossing us out into the encroaching waves of the deep blue sea.

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