

Diabologic: Dangerous!

by Frank Dolinar

On January 3rd of 2006, the *slashdot.org* website posted the following item: "Every year The Edge asks over 100 top scientists and thinkers a question, and the responses are fascinating and widely quoted. This year, psychologist Steven Pinker suggested they ask 'What is your most dangerous idea?' The 117 respondents include Richard Dawkins, Freeman Dyson, Daniel Dennett, Jared Diamond -- and that's just the D's! As you might expect, the submissions are brilliant and very controversial."

According to the website (www.edge.org) -- "The Edge Foundation, Inc., was established in 1988 as an outgrowth of a group known as The Reality Club. Its informal membership includes some of the most interesting minds in the world." Its mandate is "to promote inquiry into and discussion of intellectual, philosophical, artistic, and literary issues, as well as to work for the intellectual and social achievement of society."

This year's question was "What is your dangerous idea?" But it goes on to shape the context of the question a bit with the following comment. "The history of science is replete with discoveries that were considered socially, morally, or emotionally dangerous in their time; the Copernican and Darwinian revolutions are the most obvious. What is your dangerous idea? An idea you think about (not necessarily one you originated) that is dangerous not because it is assumed to be false, but because it might be true?"

The answers that have been provided are from disciplines all across the map of humanity's endeavors. A subset of the topics covered includes: Consciousness, Cosmology, Education, the Environment, Existentialism, Good vs. Evil, Molecular Biology, Neurophysiology, Physics, Politics, Psychology, Religion, Robotics, etc.

These answers -- from people serious about their thinking -- have gotten me thinking about a number of things.

First, I thought about the massive new wave science fiction opus Dangerous Visions, edited by Harlan Ellison and published in 1967. The website www.islets.net, named after one of the stories in the collection, describes what Ellison did in acquiring the stories for this book. "Ellison changed the rules. He solicited only unpublished works, and only from the most accomplished writers, both grand old masters and hot newcomers. Moreover, he urged his contributors to stretch, to challenge their own abilities, to offer something cutting edge that might scare off editors of the more conventional science fiction magazines." (Very much the original mold for the Edge questions.)

Second, I thought about two films, "Dangerous Minds" (in which Michelle Pfeiffer plays a teacher, and an ex-Marine, in a ghetto high school) and "Renaissance Man" (in which Danny DiVito plays an out of work executive who is hired by the U.S. Army to teach so-called "dummy" recruits how to be soldiers, by teaching them Shakespeare). The students and the soldiers are encouraged to think through the situations in which they find themselves and to think for themselves in finding solutions.

Third, I thought about the cancelled SF series "Firefly". When the character Malcomb Reynolds is confronted with a comment about being "on the wrong side of the war", he responds with "I may have been on the losing side. I'm not convinced I was on the wrong side."

In 1789, Thomas Jefferson wrote to James Madison about the future possibility of a president who didn't understand the principles on which America was founded. Near the end of that letter, Jefferson wrote, "And say, finally, whether peace is best preserved by giving energy to the government, or information to the people. This last is the most certain, and the most legitimate engine of government. Educate and inform the whole mass of the people. Enable them to see that it is their interest to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve them... They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty."

Thomas Jefferson wanted an educated and informed populace. He believed that they were better able to make the necessary day-to-day decisions about how to run their own lives than any government. Not that government doesn't have a place, just that it probably has less a place in the private lives of its citizens than in the overall handling of "the common defense", for example. But an educated, literate, and informed population, which takes part in the political process of running its country (pick a country), will take particular umbrage when and if its government attempts to tell it what it can know, read, think, and what political opinions it should support.

Just for the record, I agree wholeheartedly with Thomas Jefferson. My most dangerous idea is that every individual should have the opportunity for an extensive, ongoing education untainted by orthodoxy, the right to think for himself / herself, the freedom to act on the conclusions that accrue from that thinking, and the duty to take personal responsibility for those actions.

An educated and informed populace has a mind of its own, is opinionated, isn't afraid to take a stand and defend it with both reason and, if necessary, physical force. It won't be bullied, coerced, or led. It's hard to control.

It is, in fact, downright dangerous.

Access all 117 of the answers to the 2006 Edge question at http://www.edge.org/q2006/q06_index.html