

Taking Liberties

A Monologue by Patrick M Brennan
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TAKING LIBERTIES

(*The Scene: A middle-aged man in a lab coat. He is smiling and calm.*)

MIDDLE-AGED MAN

Good morning, everyone. Glad to see you. And I'm happy, really, that you were able to find time to come down here. And talk. And maybe, just maybe, now let's have an open mind here, maybe we can make you see things our way, okay? Can you at least keep your minds open to that possibility? Because you're perfectly free to walk out that door, that door right there, any time. Your probation officer may not be happy about that, and the alternatives may be a little harder, but you do have a free will and a free choice here. Free. Huh. So, let's get started.

Now, you don't *really* understand what the real point of all this is, do you? What are you anyway, some kind of Luddites or whatever? Smash the machines? Come *on*.

Let's start from the beginning, shall we? In the beginning there was man, and of all the things in the world that we learned to understand or explain, man himself was the most vexing, the most difficult. Are you following me? This is important. Men could explain the weather, the movements of the stars, the seasons, and even if the explanations were wrong as far as we in the modern age are concerned, they were still legitimate explanations for their time. Men could tame fire and plants and wild animals and steel. But how could anyone account for the nature of men themselves? What kind of explanation could be attached to passion, or thought, or consciousness? How could you explain love and rage and happiness and despair? What kind of an expl—

What's the matter? Too abstract for you? You know, that's part of your problem. You just refuse to take the long view. If you don't know where the ideas are coming from, how can you presume to --

Of *course* I'll keep on trying. It's my job. It's what I'm here for. Yes, I'll start again.

Okay, we'll take it from the invention of the Gapnex, about -- uh -- I don't actually remember exactly how long ago. Well, it doesn't really matter. You know what the problem was? The problem was that we were beginning to understand the incredibly subtle interactions that occur inside the human brain. The human brain is a remarkable instrument, never forget that. Amazing machine. But they were also discovering that it's an appallingly badly controlled machine. If there were such things as design tolerances on the human brain, the damn thing would swing dangerously outside spec, first this way, then that... maybe it settles down back into tolerance, only to swing out again. Flight or fight response -- adrenalin. Perfect example. Wild, sudden variance in chemical levels in a very short period of time. Appropriate response in the wild, not in a modern society. Very stressful to the organism. What am I talking about? What am I talking about?

Neurotransmitters! Ever heard of dopamine? Melatonin? Epinephrine? I didn't think so. Well, there are dozens of them, believe me. And you know what? The varying levels of these chemicals in your brain -- in *your* brain -- determine how you think, how you feel, how well you can control your body, your drives and urges, your...

You! Your thoughts, yes, your thoughts! Surges of chemicals and electricity through your brain. Look, don't argue with me, it's a fact. Scientifically demonstrated and well known for more than a hundred years. I'm getting off the track. The point is the gapnex. It's the starting point. It's the focal point. It's the real point of all of this.

Do I really care? Of course I care. We care. We're the government, we are constitutionally empowered to care for you. More than that, in fact: we are constitutionally compelled to care for you. Ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common good, secure the blessings of liberty and the pursuit of the common... something... Oh, well, political history never was my strong suit. Makes about as much sense as studying religion, you know? Anyway, we the people. We're here to see that you understand what's going on. That the real problem isn't in the system. Not out there. The real problem... *is in here.*

Anyway, the gapnex. There were these people, very sick people. Parkinson's Disease. Alzheimer's Disease. Schizophrenia, chronic depression, a few other nasties, all basically stemming from imbalances in the secretion of various neurotransmitters. Along comes regnex, the predecessor to gapnex: a remarkable instrument, a brilliant piece of engineering. Implanted in the brain. In your brain. Well not *yours*, I know. That's the problem, isn't it?

(He is starting to get a little flustered.)

Stability! That's what you get out of it! The regnex keeps everything within tolerances. Every secretion, every absorption. Regulation. Control. You don't see chronic depression around anymore, do you? Damn right you don't. And regnex was only the first step. "Reg" stands for simple regulation. After regnex, they came up with gapnex. "Gap" means general purpose. After regnex, they came up with gapnex. And that changed everything.

Some people... some people just can't see the future when it's staring them in the face. Can't see the forest for the trees. Can't see the world outside their little windows. I think that's your problem. The gapnex was not evolutionary... it was *revolutionary*. The gapnex solves so many problems at once, and you really can't see it at all. You really don't see the real point of this, do you?

The gapnex keeps me in tolerances. It calms me down, and it picks me up. It wakes me up in a pleasant, non-stressful way, it keeps me calm and alert all day long, and it lulls me to sleep in the same pleasant, non-stressful way it wakes me up. It let me be trained at the best possible speed for the best possible job for me. It let me find the best possible job. It lets me enjoy my life to the fullest extent possible. I'm never depressed, never too angry, I can always keep my head about me and think the situation out. Best of all, the gapnex lets me plug into the net and join the government, participate in a way that would have flabbergasted the founding fathers!

Well, that's the point of a revolution, isn't it? Look, the founding fathers were okay, as far as they went, but then you have to realize that they were working on limited information. They didn't have a real explanation of how men's minds and hearts -- hearts, hah -- how they really worked. All they had was a bunch of theological hooey and some philosophical explanations of free will. Come on! Created man in his own image, and gave him a transcendental free will.

You are a set of electrochemical reactions, and your life is going to be a lot happier when you just sit down and face that fact!

(He is getting a little hysterical.)

All men are created equal! That's right, they didn't know how right they were when they penned those words. Well, you know, we could quibble about the word "create", but that's not really the problem with the founding fathers. The point is that in those days, it was only approximately correct. You see: with gapnex, all men are equal. Everybody has the same tolerances imposed on their brains. We have an equal society these days: nobody is set in their life's path by an accident of how well his or her brain is regulated. Everybody is healthy up here. More than that: everybody is fit and in shape up here. Mental health is political wealth. I'm loyal, and I'm patriotic, and I serve my country well. I'm damn proud to be an American. And I'm more grateful for what my country has done for me than you are!

Oh I see. It's not gapnex that you have a problem with, really. It's the net. I suppose you are fond of the times when any unstable or incompetent personality could sit in the Oval Office, or in Congress. Those days are past us, and good riddance. I'll take the net any day. I want to have a say in the regulation of the personalities of every person that helps run this country. It's perfectly fair and perfectly natural that they should have a say in the regulation of mine. Hence the net: democracy in its most perfect form. They could never have foreseen it --

Now look, it's very simple. Most of the time you don't even notice it. You only plug in for six hours, every other day, and watch television. It doesn't violate your constitutional rights in any way. You do notice that you feel better, you work better, you think more clearly and remember more, you become an achiever and a model citizen. I always feel great coming down off the net, I can't wait until next time. It's just another part of the bargain.

You just can't make the leap of logic, can you? The notions of individual initiative and individual responsibility are obsolete, relics of an earlier time when we didn't know what the hell was happening inside a man's head. Now, I rule myself better -- through the gapnex, through the net, through society -- than ever I could have all by myself, and society is to benefit. We keep people inside their limits instead of punishing them when they go outside their limits. I don't know what you're saying, I don't know what's wrong with that. Besides, look, I can't force you to do anything. You're all obviously complete political malcontents who have no desire to join the rest of society. You can't vote without it, you can't operate a motor vehicle, own a firearm, buy property -- of course you know all this already. What can I say? I'll always be here if you want to get it installed.

(He has completely lost it.)

Why did they send you to me? What did they think I could do about you? *WHAT? WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH YOU?!!*

Christ, I gotta go plug in.

(Hasty exit.)

BLACKOUT

PERFORMANCE HISTORY

Taking Liberties had its first public performance in April 1987, at Worcester Polytechnic Institute's New Voices 5 Theatre Festival in Worcester, MA.

Director: Susan Vick
Middle-Aged Man: Dave Fraioli

Taking Liberties (v3.1) had its second public performance on February 21, 2002, at the Acme Theater Productions New Works Winter Festival, in Maynard, MA.

Director: Thelonius Griffin
Middle-Aged Man: Larry Loveridge

Taking Liberties (v3.3) had its third public performance on July 18, 19, and 20, 2002, at the Hovey Summer Shorts Festival in Waltham MA.

Director: Sarah Powell
Middle-Aged Man: Patrick M Brennan