UNDER A CLOUD: BOMB'S ROOTS DEEP WITHIN OUR NATURE:


Though most can appreciate the visual similarity between mushrooms and mushroom clouds, very few appreciate how similar they are in other ways. Each common mushroom is the fleeting surface expression of a much larger and more powerful entity living within the soil. Likewise, each mushroom cloud is the fleeting expression of a deeper impulse for violent conflict within Homo sapiens.

This month marks the 60th anniversary of atomic war. On Aug. 6, 1945, a fission bomb nicknamed "Little Boy" was dropped on Hiroshima, leveling miles of terrain in the heart of the city. Three days later, on Aug. 9, 1945, a second bomb nicknamed "Fat Man" was dropped on Nagasaki, bringing the total number of casualties to well over 200,000. Five days later, on Aug. 15, the Japanese military surrendered, ending the War in the Pacific.

These bombs had two major impacts on adults of the so-called "greatest generation." The first was to bring about a quick end to World War II. The second was to usher in a new era of public discourse involving war and peace.

As a child of the 1950s, the discourse I heard involved the awesome, if not intoxicating, power of nuclear bombs; America's unspoken guilt for the innocent civilian deaths caused by these weapons of mass destruction; and above all, the bomb-shelter fear of being annihilated by similar weapons arriving via missiles from communist Russia.

Little Boy and Fat Man were perfect storms with respect to the visual theater of thermonuclear physics. Clearly defined, light-colored plumes of heat rose quickly to form their vertical columns, then more slowly to form their turbulent spreading caps. These visuals were also part of the psychological theater of World War II and its lingering aftermath -- a rapid burst of dramatic violence was followed by years of spreading anxiety in which we baby boomers were simmered.

Like their atomic counterparts, common mushrooms are also light-colored and grow quickly before spreading out. Each toadstool contains the reproductive parts of a much larger mass of fungal tissue woven within the soil connected by an underground internet of fast-growing "rootlets," more properly known as hyphae.

When ready to reproduce, the fungal entity sends hyphae upward to the soil surface. From there they grow above the organic litter, first as a stalk, then later as a cap broad enough to have room for spore-producing gills. Once fully developed, the spores can be dropped and carried about by wind, raindrops and other surface processes.

Similarly, atomic mushroom clouds are the surface expressions of a biological impulse simmering beneath everyday life, especially in males. In less developed nations, this is often manifested as tribal conflict and ethnic cleansing; in more developed nations, it is institutionalized as national armed forces.

A fungal mushroom grows by absorbing and recycling dead organic matter. An atomic mushroom grows from the soil of many human attributes, including territorialism, aggression, dominance, inventiveness, challenge and curiosity.

My point is not to suggest that we become fungi so that we may live beneath the soil while we wait and hope for our warlike impulses to disappear. Instead, my point is to exploit the bubble of media
interest in the historic atomic bombings to help readers learn a lesson about human nature from something broader called nature.

Picking a mushroom doesn't destroy the organism living beneath the ground. Nor will decommissioning our atomic bombs or other WMDs destroy the subconscious rivalry, fear and aggression that will inevitably find their way to the surface of our lives.

The best we can hope for is to agree that our higher instincts should be used to suppress our more primitive ones, and that fostering international peace is better than fostering international war.