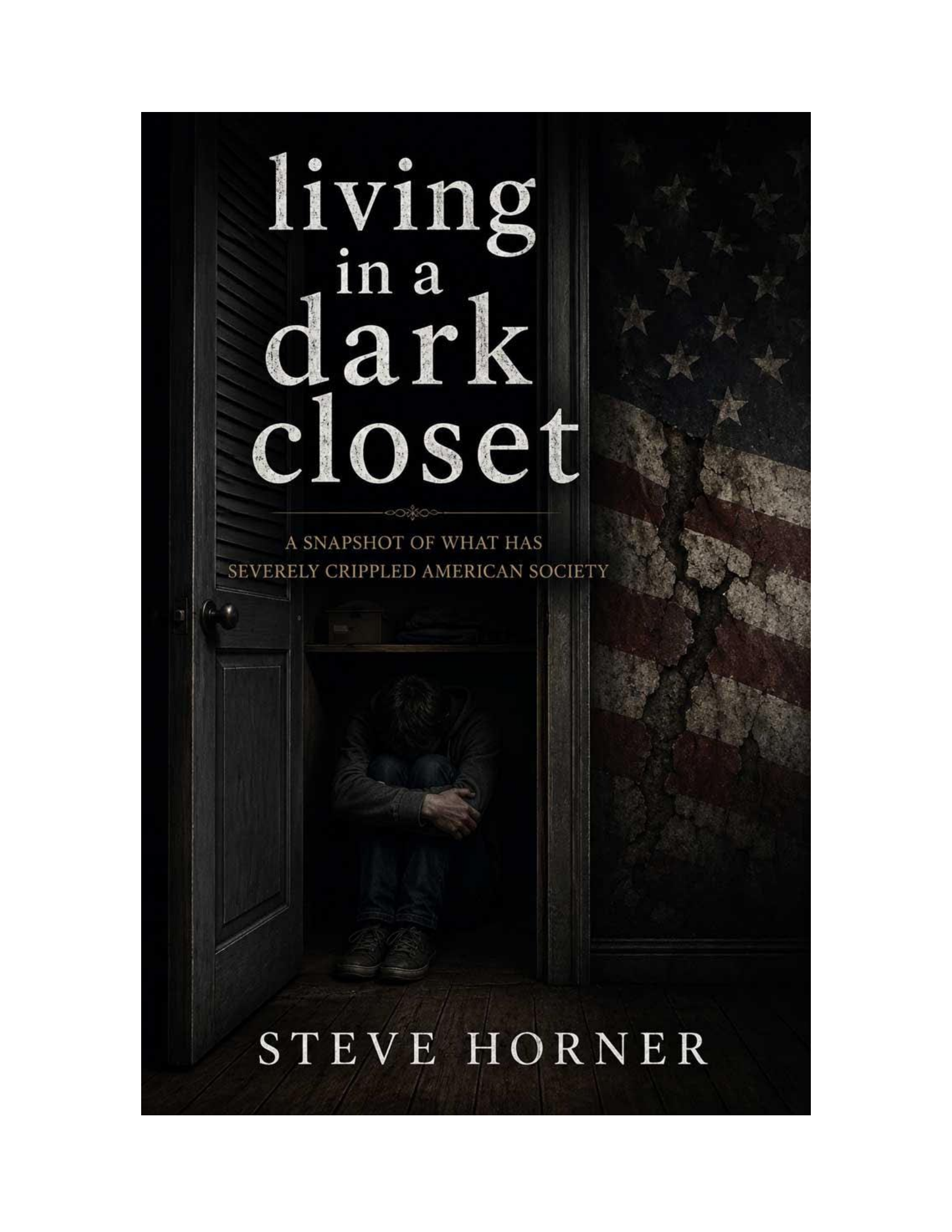




living in a dark closet

A SNAPSHOT OF WHAT HAS
SEVERELY CRIPPLED AMERICAN SOCIETY

STEVE HORNER

LIVING IN A DARK CLOSET

A snapshot of what has severely
crippled American society

by

Steve Horner

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Author's note on the artwork:

Cover images and interior graphics were fashioned by Greg and Adam with the help of artificial intelligence. I'm cautious about our society's growing dependence on AI, as you'll discover in the pages of this book. However, I'm also a realist and acknowledge that AI can be a fun and creative tool when used judiciously.

Some people find their way to a life of dignity and happiness. Others seem content wallowing in misery and cowardice. And so it goes.

Meanwhile, here in America, it seems as though nothing of any real social consequence is expressed openly; it's kept stored away in a dark closet, out of the view of others, when only occasionally does a beam of enlightenment sneak through the crevices to last but a brief moment in time before going to black again.

This widespread situation is a major flaw in America's armor. It is a disturbing phenomenon that has lurked like an evil shadow throughout human development for which philosophers, and even modern psychologists, have yet to give a satisfying explanation. Yet, it's been encased in our human DNA since Adam and Eve.

What is the cause of this social flaw? Are we ingesting some foreign agent introduced to our bodies by air or through our food chain? Meanwhile, it has become so daunting that people are afraid to speak their minds for fear of negative repercussions like job loss, spouse loss, family loss, financial loss, popularity loss, and social alienation.

The effects of this widespread social flaw have brought about widespread social chaos evidenced by broken families, broken hearts, a demise of personal spirituality and responsibility, high crime, and a general collapse of what used to be described as strong American values.

A huge part of the problem of trying to fix the social chaos created by this social flaw is that everyone claims to be blameless; everyone is pointing their finger of blame at others. It's a lot like car and truck drivers who complain about "lousy drivers." Have you ever heard anyone admit to being a lousy driver? Of course not. So, the conclusion is that if everyone else is a lousy driver, except that person in the mirror, then where are these lousy drivers that everyone complains about?

The lousy driver example is a simplified case of spotlighting the challenge of fixing the widespread social flaw which causes today's widespread social chaos. This same principle of "who's to blame?" can be applied to political parties, men and women, and people of different races. Everyone seems to be individually blameless. That's because everyone, young and old, has a dark closet in which to hide.

See if you can relate to this scenario. It's a Saturday morning about eleven. I just retrieved the newspaper from the driveway and am sitting down to enjoy a late breakfast of oatmeal with honey, topped with cinnamon, strawberries, and a sliced banana. On the side I have a rye toast

smothered with pb&j, along with a large mug of hot, black tea straight up. Bob Dylan is singing of sunny skies on my phono.

The news stories of that morning are basically no different than any other day: crime is all around us, public schools are a disaster, parenting is in the dumper, families are busted, the cost of living soars, tensions remain high in the Middle East and elsewhere, stress is a knot in everyone's stomach, and politicians continue bashing each other. It's the same ol' crap but with a slightly different aroma.

Are we destined to live out our lives with that nasty stench infiltrating our everyday existence? You might be, but not me. I take measures to keep it out of my life. My efforts may not always be successful, but just knowing that I tried keeps most of that stink out of my life while allowing a flurry of sunlight and enlightenment into what would have been a very dark closet and then blasts that confining closet in which I dwelled into smithereens.

Ahhh . . . liberation!

You can experience that very same liberation . . . the same results, maybe even sunnier and more enlightening. But in order to recognize the source of that nasty stench which is the blockade to your life of dignity and happiness, you have to put a name to it. You must recognize it as APATHY. Apathy is the major flaw in America's armor.

Apathy is a subject I tackle often in my timeless podcasts titled *Steve's Cottage*. My entire set of 70, professionally-produced, 25-minute episodes which speak of today's social chaos, the negative effects of that chaos, the explanation of how we got to this point, and what we can do about it, is also available on the podcast link at stevehornerbooks.com.

Apathy is allowing yourself to be sentenced to a miserable life of silence because you have chosen to be a coward and remain uninvolved in the world around you. Apathy is being indifferent about an incident, or policy, or someone's behavior, or maybe your own personal behavior or failures, which you realize need your attention. But you've chosen to justify your apathy and inaction by making the false claims of "It's not my responsibility," "I'm not going to get involved and lose my job," "What will my wife think?" "It's too much trouble . . . too much work . . . let someone else do it."

Meanwhile, the problem doesn't go away and in many cases grows into being more of a problem negatively affecting you, your family, and community at large.

President Ronald Reagan spoke of the wisdom of getting involved when he spoke to a group of Navy Seabees at his California ranch in 1981: “Life isn’t a hard-raging river leaving us abandoned without oars or a rudder. We have the power to navigate and to choose our own course of direction.”

Now, I’m not suggesting that there’s not danger involved with finding a place at the front of the fray; hell, that’s part of the adventure and why most women don’t have what it takes to get involved (see my pink book *C.U.N.T.* at stevehornerbooks.com and podcast episode #68). However, win or lose, the adventure always comes with rewards and the lifelong satisfaction of knowing that at least you had the guts to follow your conscience and enter your horse in the race.

I entered my horse in the race when I signed up to join the United States Army in the spring of 1967. As I speak of my account as an infantryman in Vietnam in my book *Dear Folks* (see stevehornerbooks.com) I was out looking for adventure, and man oh man did I find it. The experiences of that adventure gave me a huge boost in my self-esteem, my confidence, and a feeling of dignity because I had jumped into the front of the fray in support of my country’s efforts to rid those Vietnamese peasants of the terrorism of communism which I believed, and still do, was a noble cause. And, because of my combat wounds, which could have killed me but didn’t, I enjoy a lifetime of fully-paid, top-quality health care from the VA.

As with any conflict, there are people with various opinions on both sides of the fence; Vietnam was certainly the most socially polarizing conflict of my lifetime, mostly because of biased misinformation from the news media, but I believed my intentions were honorable so I followed my conscience.

One of my all-time sports heroes, Muhammad Ali, also followed his conscience regarding Vietnam, only from the other side of the fence. When Muhammad was drafted which, coincidentally, might have put him in basic training with me, he refused enlistment as a conscientious objector which caused him all sorts of legal hassles, social ostracism, and abolishment from professional boxing for several years during his prime. Still, Muhammad followed his conscience and was oftentimes quoted justifying his position: “A man who stands for nothing, falls for everything.”

I don’t agree with what the champ did by refusing enlistment, but I don’t begrudge him for following his conscience because I’m not the judge of anyone’s conscience and true beliefs, that’s God’s exclusive department, but I do admire Muhammad for making a stand for his beliefs

because when you get involved in the social issues of the world around you, you oftentimes end up bruised and muddy, even bloody, but that's where the true rewards of life lie; that's where the dignity comes from, and dignity often results in happiness; knowing you had the guts to enter your horse in the race. And that's the message I profess to my podcast audience at the end of each of my 70 episodes of *Steve's Cottage*: "As you make your way to reaching your goals, the less-traveled trail often provides the most-wonderful rewards."



The man in the mirror

Muhammad consulted and listened to the man in the mirror. Just think of the agonizing pain he would have experienced had he reluctantly enlisted and then, through the tragedies of war, ended up killing a whole family of Vietnamese peasants. How could he, as a conscientious objector, go on living with himself? But, even as it was, Muhammad was punished severely by the secular world for listening to his conscience.

When you see something and you know it's wrong and it just doesn't make any sense, and the man in the mirror urges you to let your opinions be known, you have to be aware of the possible and oftentimes, inevitable, backlash.

When I was knee-deep in my single-parent years, about which I write in my single-parenting book at stevehornerbooks.com, I had an eye on feminists who were speaking up in defense of their civil rights such as equal pay for equal work. So, after a short drive to the newly-

opened Mall of America for an early evening beer at Gators, I felt my rights were infringed upon by being required to pay an entrance fee, based on my gender, while women, based on their gender, were being allowed free admission; certainly a far cry from the “equal rights” women were clamoring for in public. I guess they didn’t realize that by adhering to the United States Constitution, a person is sometimes required to take a little salt with their sugar.

Well, my civil rights complaint against Gators hit all the news outlets which made me a folk hero to a few, but a loser, clown, and misogynist to most, but to whose wrath of death threats and broken windows never made me regret my stand for fairness. Because what I did that day spoke of CONSISTENCY in law enforcement: what’s fair today is fair tomorrow unless you get off your fat ass and work to change the law and quit being so passive about getting involved and protecting your civil rights. And that’s why this ladies’ night caper presents itself as an excellent example of teaching the merits of discipline which I used in Chapter Six of my single-parenting book.

Ladies’ night has been a personally rewarding episode of life but it did come with plenty of heat including alienation from many family members. And I think that’s why most people choose to stay away from the front of the fray of any hot issue only to discover later that their passivity comes with unforeseen repercussions.



Being passive has its downside

The hundreds of media interviews I participated in regarding the hypocrisy of gender-based pricing at places of public accommodation gave me an opportunity to point out the arrogance created by giving favors to females based on their gender as if they were entitled princesses. It's that bratty and conceited attitude of arrogance which makes women ages 18-34 the fastest-growing segment of prison and jail inmates. It also contributes to the rise of domestic violence (see *C.U.N.T.-SEQUENCES* at stevehornerbooks.com). Now, however, thanks to my patriotic stint of knocking out gender-based pricing, many more Americans have come to realize the stipulations of playing on a level playing field.

By the way, over the years, I heard from dozens of bartenders who worked ladies' nights and each one of them told me, "The women on those nights when their drinks are free or reduced in price are totally lousy tippers; it's like they think they deserve the favors."

Also, it's my strong hunch, with support from conversations I've had with law enforcement people, that ladies' nights no doubt contributed to a spike in DUIs and, according to several state legislators I've spoken with, unwanted pregnancies.

Before I even got into those hectic, but very rewarding, years of single parenting, I had to make the arduous decision of whether or not I wanted to fight for "custody" (I hate that term) of my two young sons, ages 2 and 5.

After my wife of nearly ten years finally told me, "Steve, I just don't love you anymore" and that she wanted to divorce me. I was already on shaky ground with a new job and the thought of having full-time responsibility of my two young sons kept me up nights. But through prayer, exercise, and conversations with friends and family professionals I decided to seek out a lawyer I could afford and ended up winning the decision. It was almost unheard of for a man to get custody of his kids in a contested case back in 1984.

But, you see, after long stretches of personal reflection my decision came down to issues of being stupid, cowardly, and lacking the gumption to tackle the job. I knew that if I left all the parenting decisions up to my ex-wife my kids wouldn't be raised the way I wanted them raised with the values I wanted to instill in them. Also, if I lost the custody decision, I would spend the next 15 years dangling on puppet strings playing to the whims of a vindictive ex-wife and her feminist girlfriends in regards to where the kids would live, when I would get to see them, and how much I would pay in child support. There were going to be huge negative consequences to pay if I didn't fight for my kids.



I see nothing, I hear nothing, I say nothing

Looking back over those child-rearing years and as I wrote in my single-parenting book (stevehornerbooks.com) which was endorsed by many, prominent parenting voices of the day, the experience provided me with more joy, dignity, satisfaction of life, and personal rewards than any amount of money could have possibly provided. But I had to fight the demons of apathy to get there; I did, and I won.

Whoopie! Let the glorious sun shine in.

After the boys were grown and left home to build lives of their own, and I was approaching 50, I sold my Minnesota home, put my belongings in storage, and hit the road chasing rainbows for a few years; a period of time to which I refer as Steve's Big Adventure.

Late one summer afternoon while in Boise, Idaho, working for a group of radio stations, I was on my way home stopped at a red light while pedestrians were crossing the street in front of me.

As one might expect Alfred Hitchcock to make his customary cameo appearance in every film he directed, as he did in one of the early scenes in his thriller *Psycho*, there, right out of the blue, walking in front of me was my good buddy, Pat, with whom I worked as a young teenager at Wagon Wheel Stables, just about ten miles south of Minneapolis which, of course, is all built up now.

I honked my horn and yelled to him, turned at the corner, parked, and hustled over to give him a big hug. I was happy to see my old chum.

I soon found out that Pat was living out of his motor home while traveling the west trying to get his head back on straight after the death of his wife due to cancer.

After Pat and I got reacquainted with each other after so many years we took a couple road trips together and enjoyed hikes up in the hills around Boise and down by the river.

One day while hiking a wooded area on a dirt trail by the river's edge, I asked Pat if he had heard the rumors about the owner of Wagon Wheel, Jim Moen, as being a pedophile, sexually abusing the young boys who worked for him.

That conversation opened up a lot of dark doors for Pat and me which had previously kept the sunshine out. Thanks to Pat, I decided to face the man in the mirror and write a book letting the world know what was really going on at Wagon Wheel Riding Stables. The whole sordid tale is played out in *The Boys of Wagon Wheel Stables* at stevehornerbooks.com.

With such a hot topic on the table, a topic which causes a lot of shame in many men and women, it would have been easy to allow that man in the mirror to be just another apathetic, sympathetic, diabolical denizen of know-nothing-do-nothing USA, but through prayer I found the strength and conviction to carry on.

Spilling the beans about the child abuse at Wagon Wheel won me accolades from Jeff Anderson and Associates, one of America's foremost legal voices in defense of children against child abuse. And just knowing that I got this dark conversation out from behind closed doors into the sunlight for full inspection and scrutiny has been a real character builder for me. And I owe it all to God and the man in the mirror.

As a quick sidebar to the ugly Wagon Wheel saga, over the years I've received several emails from women (never men) who have read my book and then blame me for dirtying their innocent, childhood memories of riding horses at Wagon Wheel without showing an ounce of empathy for us boys. Pretty hypocritical if you ask me. Probably all #METOO cunts. Ha.

Being effective at tackling the negative backlash of apathy in your life necessitates being proactive which centers around the notion of spotting a potential problem and then, instead of waiting for the inevitable results of that problem to smack you square in the face, you take preemptive action to keep the problem from occurring in the first place. There is an example of being proactive which I have frequently shared with my podcast audiences.

Many of the problems I talk about at Steve's Cottage stem from public policies that don't have the well-being of you and your family's interest in mind. It's kind of like having a big, mean, gnarly-looking dog circle your neighborhood threatening young and old alike, but your apathetic mind is telling you that the fence around your property will keep that harmful animal away from you and your family.



Being proactive works for the benefit of you and your family

These days, one of those gnarly-looking animals is referred to as AI, or Artificial Intelligence. I refer to it as Artificial Involvement. Do you want that animal in your home providing an escape hatch for your kids from challenging their own minds through research and real-life experiences when composing schoolwork and personal communication? To me, AI provides another way of accommodating laziness and dumbing down America just as the public-school system has done.

My first encounter with AI started when my podcast engineer-marketing guy, Shawn, showed me how we could hype up the show's description by using AI, and that's what we did for about the last 25 episodes. We referred to our AI composer as "Gertrude."

I must admit, Gertrude's program synopses are quite funny and often flattering, but they are full of hyperbole and not written with true human emotion, but with Artificial Involvement. It's

fake. And that's the kind of results you'll experience when that gnarly-looking animal of AI eventually jumps your yard fence and gets into your home as a homework helper to initiate tone, grammar, vernacular, spelling, semantics, syntax, history, and course of the narrative, often utilizing nonexistent anecdotes, misattributed quotations, and other gross misrepresentations, leaving personal initiative and creativity to take a back seat to comfort and convenience, the ever-present bane of American culture.

Lately, it seems like a person can't even write a reply to a simple email anymore without AI sticking its nose in their business.

The Board of Directors and the property management firm, Community Association Management (CAM), that they hired at the HOA (homeowners association) where I'm a property owner in St. George, Utah, has opted to utilize AI to handle complaints and concerns from property owners like me. I think it's just another way of cowards dodging human interaction.

Over the years I've exchanged some harsh discourse with these HOA people because I feel like they're clearly violating HOA and state laws by not inviting me to their meetings or not allowing me to review financial records. Sure, we've been to court and sometimes I win and sometimes I lose; it's an uphill battle fighting the cronyism of the local Mormon culture because I'm viewed by these insiders simply as a "troublemaker" but, lately, I've been working with the Utah State Legislature regarding HOAs and finally making some nice progress. And if I had more support from other property owners I'd be making more progress, but their heads are stuck in the sands of apathy and cowardice.

Meanwhile, I received an email notice from the HOA people telling me the water would be turned off for a couple of hours the next day for repairs. My suggested reply from AI read: "You sorry morons can't do anything right."

I was infuriated. I wrote back saying, "The AI response isn't anything like I had in mind and I'm really offended. What I was going to write is that I appreciated being told of the water shut-off in advance."

I did get an apology from the HOA management firm.

By now, you might be getting the idea that I'm a digital sourpuss, and in some regards you would be right, but I know I'm not alone. By inviting that gnarly AI animal into your home you're giving the go-ahead to the construction of AI data centers all across the country which use an inordinate amount of water and energy which will eventually negatively impact your life with

higher taxes, higher utility costs, and shortages of natural resources. But proponents of AI will argue that AI is as much government and military oriented as it is consumer oriented and that we need it to keep ahead of our adversaries.

Frankly, I think the bottom line is that it's all a big, ridiculous race to the edge of the cliff. It's a "cliff" to which I often make reference in my set of 70 podcast episodes titled *Steve's Cottage* at stevehornerbooks.com.

Am I making a naive exaggeration of digital dangers? I don't think so. Just think about it: since the widespread use of computers, has our American culture become more or less peaceful, loving and harmonious? Are families happier and more intact, or less? Are we more or less spiritual? Is crime higher or lower? Is individual debt higher or lower? Is our national debt higher or lower?

The answers are obvious—at least to those of us paying attention.

CONCLUSION

As a baby boomer I've set my life-long goal of living to be 120 years old. Sure, scoff if you must, but I figure that I'll only go around once in life so I might as well make the most of it, complete with the ups and the downs. Besides, anyone who has been in sales knows that if you're going to be a success in anything, you must set goals.

Now, in order to reach my goal of 120 I have to live a lifestyle that will help me get there. And, unlike millions of other baby boomers who ignore exercise while indulging in poor eating habits, too much booze, and television time, I'm being proactive in trying to live a life that will help me reach my lofty goal.

For me, I find satisfaction in letting my opinions be known to policymakers. I believe that satisfaction will help me live longer. I also enjoy picking up roadside and public park garbage; it's a healthy and relaxing pastime in which anybody can participate. It's good exercise, sets a good example to others, gives me a great feeling of accomplishment and empowerment. I mean, after all, who doesn't respect the guy who picks up garbage? It makes me feel like I'm king of the hill. All of which helps me live a life of dignity and happiness while keeping me from wallowing in misery and cowardice. And who wouldn't agree that this exuberance will help me

live happier and longer? The mental and physical benefits of volunteer work are listed in my single-parenting book.

Other volunteer stints I've enjoyed along the way include work at the church, help feed the hungry, youth mentoring and youth sports coach, entertaining holiday programs at the VA and assisted-care facilities, and a host of others. They've all been very personally strengthening and fulfilling and make me happy to be reaping the good that I've sown.

Ahhh—let the sun shine in.

Also, by expressing your heartfelt opinions to public policymakers you'll discover just how strong and patriotic it makes you feel by inspiring you to want to do it again and again and again. Then, when your opinions are found to have merit and are acted upon by that policymaker you'll be able to once again relish in your 15 minutes of fame which really does a body, mind, heart and soul a world of good.

It's that individual involvement, which translates to patriotism, which is how we all chip in to make America great again. Besides, if you're not going to get the job done, who will?

Just remember that by speaking your conscience on hot-button issues you'll probably run into some negative feedback which, if it doesn't kill you, will probably make you stronger. It's the type of feedback that's 180 degrees different than what a movie star receives from her adoring fans, or the glory bestowed on the new homerun leader, or the adulation shown to rock stars. When you display your patriotism by pointing out social flaws and hypocrisy, there will be those who want to claw you to death as the Bible professes in Second Timothy 3:12, John 7:5-7 and Luke 12:49-53. These verses testify that during His earthly ministry Jesus wasn't in the business of sucking up to people to make friends. He laid out the hard, cold facts of living honorably, and that wasn't always warmly received. But, I believe that sticking to your guns is what we as Christians and Americans are called to do and there's not a better feeling to experience if you win. And if you lose? Well, there's always the satisfaction of knowing that at least you had the guts to enter your horse in the race, which is what most people are afraid of doing.

My final take on the subject of apathy is inscribed in the preface of my novel, *The Unusual Frank White Man* (stevehornerbooks.com).

It reads: “If this story fails to call you to action, you’re fast asleep, in which case I hope you’re somehow able to protect yourself and your family from the inevitable consequences of doing nothing.”

Good luck fighting the demons of apathy. And whether you win or lose, I think you’ll find the battle worthwhile.