

To Feel Lucky as Collapse Progresses / Tom Friedman's Awakening

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Culture Change Letter #240 - Slow collapse is what we need, if possible. As bad as this seems, "So far so good." The kind of fast collapse from a massive interruption in oil supplies is much harder to handle.

The system is teetering on many levels, and there are uncertainties, but fall it will.

Many people around the world are hurting, but not those who have a secure connection to a fruitful, healthy land base belonging to their community.

In the U.S., where the Census no longer has a designation for "Farmer" for lack of numbers, the food charities are stressed from unprecedented demand, while foreclosures and firings mean homelessness for some. And in a minimum-community culture, there's nowhere to go -- in the 1930s' Great Depression a room could be had in a relative's farmhouse out in the country.

What we need is somewhere to go in our minds: a vision of better living and liberation. It's time to take John Lennon's advice and "Imagine."

Are we really so unlucky if the cars go away, and we get back to local community living? That's the direction we're heading in. When we hear so-called leaders' messages to the contrary, their business-as-usual programming threatens to delay the people from waking up from passivity.

Somehow, as useless as the dinosaurs of never-ending growth are, it feels as if patience with their disappearance from dominance is harmless enough. A nonviolent revolution is the idea, even if people who will be starving by the hundreds of millions -- if there's valid concern for the effects of climate disruption and petrocollapse -- will not do so quietly.

Meanwhile, instead of preparing for the real future, faith in employment and Big Brother means droves of citizens are flocking back to college -- to compete for jobs on the Titanic rather than get skills that are not necessarily taught in colleges.

Does clinging to a crumbling structure or sinking ship make sense when it's more and more clear that getting what we need from the usual paycheck and latest investment bubble is becoming passé? When the food supply is severely threatened by droughts? How many consumers have discovered that the food supply can dry up in a few days from an oil-market crisis having to do with the end of oil-powered world trade, now that we've hit peak oil? The food riots several months ago are destined to return more widely and magnified, toppling governments and corporations. It will be an overpopulation in panic -- not a pleasant thought, so it is buried along with reports like Culture Change's.

The grid will go down. What man has built is idiotic if it can't last. To assume we need it is to sign up for thousands of years of nuclear waste, mercury poisoning from burning coal, as "renewable energy" has only a supplementary role when applied to the grid. The technotopia of renewables looks like it has been curtailed (if it was ever on track) due to the financial meltdown. The end of the techno-dream of clean energy for a huge consumer economy will also be due to the rusting, giant petroleum infrastructure. Get ready for small scale energy uses that are simply part of keeping ourselves warm and growing and cooking food, based on proven traditions without shopping at big box stores.

Dealing with collapse proactively is getting all the more urgent, and that includes realizing that the talking heads have

been hopelessly invested in a broken system that was painful and wrong from the get-go. Fortunately, one of them must have had a revelation or had the equivalent of some psychedelic trip:

Tom Friedman of the New York Times has woken up. In last weekend's column "The Inflection Is Near?" he has come around to the basic position Culture Change has maintained for two decades. The column has brilliance, and he's talking to smarter people now. Unlike his economist colleague Paul Krugman, Friedman now sees limits to the Earth's capacity to give up resources and be polluted, and thus a new direction is indicated as of 2008. Several people have sent the column to me, including a long-time reader of Culture Change who has differed with me over the technofix: "Friedman's beginning to sound like you!" Here it is, with my only quibble afterwards:

The Inflection Is Near?

By Thomas L. Friedman

March 7, 2009

Sometimes the satirical newspaper The Onion is so right on, I can't resist quoting from it. Consider this faux article from June 2005 about America's addiction to Chinese exports:

FENGHUA, China — Chen Hsien, an employee of Fenghua Ningbo Plastic Works Ltd., a plastics factory that manufactures lightweight household items for Western markets, expressed his disbelief Monday over the "sheer amount of [garbage] Americans will buy. Often, when we're assigned a new order for, say, 'salad shooters,' I will say to myself, 'There's no way that anyone will ever buy these.' ... One month later, we will receive an order for the same product, but three times the quantity. How can anyone have a need for such useless [garbage]? I hear that Americans can buy anything they want, and I believe it, judging from the things I've made for them," Chen said. "And I also hear that, when they no longer want an item, they simply throw it away. So wasteful and contemptible."

Let's today step out of the normal boundaries of analysis of our economic crisis and ask a radical question: What if the crisis of 2008 represents something much more fundamental than a deep recession? What if it's telling us that the whole growth model we created over the last 50 years is simply unsustainable economically and ecologically and that 2008 was when we hit the wall — when Mother Nature and the market both said: "No more."

We have created a system for growth that depended on our building more and more stores to sell more and more stuff made in more and more factories in China, powered by more and more coal that would cause more and more climate change but earn China more and more dollars to buy more and more U.S. T-bills so America would have more and more money to build more and more stores and sell more and more stuff that would employ more and more Chinese ...

We can't do this anymore.

"We created a way of raising standards of living that we can't possibly pass on to our children," said Joe Romm, a physicist and climate expert who writes the indispensable blog climateprogress.org. We have been getting rich by depleting all our natural stocks — water, hydrocarbons, forests, rivers, fish and arable land — and not by generating renewable flows.

"You can get this burst of wealth that we have created from this rapacious behavior," added Romm. "But it has to collapse, unless adults stand up and say, 'This is a Ponzi scheme. We have not generated real wealth, and we are destroying a livable climate ...' Real wealth is something you can pass on in a way that others can enjoy."

Over a billion people today suffer from water scarcity; deforestation in the tropics destroys an area the size of Greece

every year — more than 25 million acres; more than half of the world's fisheries are over-fished or fished at their limit.

"Just as a few lonely economists warned us we were living beyond our financial means and overdrawing our financial assets, scientists are warning us that we're living beyond our ecological means and overdrawing our natural assets," argues Glenn Prickett, senior vice president at Conservation International. But, he cautioned, as environmentalists have pointed out: "Mother Nature doesn't do bailouts."

One of those who has been warning me of this for a long time is Paul Gilding, the Australian environmental business expert. He has a name for this moment — when both Mother Nature and Father Greed have hit the wall at once — "The Great Disruption."

"We are taking a system operating past its capacity and driving it faster and harder," he wrote me. "No matter how wonderful the system is, the laws of physics and biology still apply." We must have growth, but we must grow in a different way. For starters, economies need to transition to the concept of net-zero, whereby buildings, cars, factories and homes are designed not only to generate as much energy as they use but to be infinitely recyclable in as many parts as possible. Let's grow by creating flows rather than plundering more stocks.

Gilding says he's actually an optimist. So am I. People are already using this economic slowdown to retool and reorient economies. Germany, Britain, China and the U.S. have all used stimulus bills to make huge new investments in clean power. South Korea's new national paradigm for development is called: "Low carbon, green growth." Who knew? People are realizing we need more than incremental changes — and we're seeing the first stirrings of growth in smarter, more efficient, more responsible ways.

In the meantime, says Gilding, take notes: "When we look back, 2008 will be a momentous year in human history. Our children and grandchildren will ask us, 'What was it like? What were you doing when it started to fall apart? What did you think? What did you do?' " Often in the middle of something momentous, we can't see its significance. But for me there is no doubt: 2008 will be the marker — the year when 'The Great Disruption' began.

Friedman sees more than an inflection or deviation from the economy's course; he is implying a culture change. He is experiencing his own inflection in awareness, and at this rate he will give up on the growth paradigm for good. He's on the verge of truly redefining growth, but he may not understand yet that "clean power" is not the salvation of the consumer economy. The Great Disruption he speaks of will continue to inflect Friedman and the rest of us until we see what kind of society(ties) survive collapse, and we start living -- instead of trying to make a killing or tolerating others who try (as "Father Greed") to do it.

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Reference:

The Inflection Is Near?

Further Reading:

Dissolve the U.S.: an Option for Proactive Change before Collapse by Jan Lundberg on Culture Change

In Russian:

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(Culture Change Letter #221)

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Counter Argument for "Stimulus," Growth and Employment by Jan Lundberg on Culture Change

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