Welcome to the Masque of the Red Death?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
19 April 2011

We are in the presence of death when we see so many signs that our species' modern behavior is shockingly deficient in living up to our responsibility to protect life. The ongoing Fukushima disaster, visiting upon us all, is the supreme example, on top of deforestation and fossil foolery (e.g., coal burning and plastics proliferation). They all rage on as we vainly try to muddle through individualistically.

In the Masque of the Red Death, by Edgar Allan Poe, Death himself walks freely among the revelers of the masque ball held by Prince Prospero.
They wanted the easy way out, to ignore the unspeakable threat of plague, just as we do today with our real-life drama fraught with avoidance and denial. The party goes on, whether it is held in a "plague-safe" Abbey, or in the real world in our deteriorating biosphere -- despite the growing presence of death more noticeable than ever.

The Masque of the Red Death is an apt parable for us today. Many pretend that risks of high certainty are not lethal, as they enter our food, air and water. We can lay much blame at the corporate media for much of the illusion generated to keep the status quo. The illusion amounts to a twisted message for mind control. Yet, our freedom and future are up to us, and there are more ways than participating in or blocking out media to improve general awareness and bring about wise action. The domination of our space by cars, asphalt and private buildings and fenced greenery presents just as much an impediment to letting go of the status quo as the corporate media. One day our imaginations and a stronger spirit of love and cooperation will help cure mass materialism and abuse of nature.

Or, we can say more dispassionately and even more optimistically that the presence of Mr. Death today, as he starts to walk among us during our global-trade party, is only a warning for us. For we fervently wish to transition from the Waste Economy's imperialism to a "green" future. More and more of us realize that the party -- consuming -- has raged on too long, and is too exuberant for our own health and the health of countless species. The party is ending shortly, but some are in denial as they consume away with no end of personal machines and even astronomical monetary wealth. A most disturbing aspect of the last hours of the party is the aggravated disparity of wealth; this helps hasten the appearance of Death before us (some of us). A transition rather than the less pleasant wrenching transformation is precluded greatly by the super wealthy "raking it in." As in the Poe play, the super rich are in the end not insulated from collapse or ecocide.

I'm reveling right now when I play some enjoyable music on this computer, as part of the artificial-lifestyle party. I don't always want to pick up my acoustic guitar and sing, but it's never bad for one's health or for the Earth to do so. Electronic entertainment is tempting -- and isolating for the most part as it maximizes needless entropy.

I have some intimate familiarity with the Poe play. In 1986 I took my baby daughter across the country from L.A. to New England and New York. In the latter I narrated passages of the Masque of the Red Death before an audience of classical music fans, to set off excitement and fear during the Muir String Quartet's performance of André Caplet's Conte Fantastique (The Masque of the Red Death) featuring the harp. Soloist Heidi Lehwalder was the star of the performance and is mother of my daughter.

Now, twenty five years after that exquisite and lighthearted treatment of the Red Death, the younger generation all over the Earth is clearly inheriting (and increasingly resents) the "party" of deadly destruction that the older generation obliviously attended and unleashed.

What consumers don't realize is that their habits of waste and inefficiency are an aberration of history and evolution. The common worker has been able only in recent history to indulge in certain luxuries that were once only for the rich. So cleverly have the inventors and fabricators, with market economics, given us impressive products -- along with huge carbon footprints, cancer and overflowing landfills.

Technology is an abuser of nature, as a rapist is an abuser of a person. Science and knowledge are one thing, but when the forces of greed use and misuse technology and science, this hurts and kills, and brings on collapse. Collapse is proving to be of an uncertain nature with no floor, at best a never-seen-before event. This is not to say that wonderful benefits and release can't somehow become the principal result.

A big reason to bet on collapse rather than a smooth transition to sustainability is the absence of public involvement: the photo below is of last Saturday's rally at the the most dangerous nuclear power station perhaps in North America, Diablo Canyon, mid way between San Francisco and Los Angeles:

Such a small number of protesters, despite publicity and outreach such as on CultureChange.org, is a clear sign that the presence of death is being ignored by the general U.S. population until it is too late. Partying on and enjoying the convenient power of polluting, deadly energy only invites the worst kind of collapse and toxic, radioactive future. Surely we can do better than that.

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Further reading and a performance:

André Caplet's Conte Fantastique (The Masque of the Red Death) for harp and strings, was published in 1924. Read about him at
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andre_Caplet, and about the Poe play at
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Masque_of_the_Red_Death

See and hear the
YouTube performance with harpist Alice Giles: youtube.com - Part One and
youtube.com - Part Two

Diablo Canyon Nuke Power Plant: Battleground for Ending Radioactive Terror by Jan Lundberg,
15 April 2011