

Getting There (Part 1): Awakening from the U.S. Delusion

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Editor's note: A popular online news service asked for a follow-up article to my recent "Social Justice Activists Must Take Into Account Ecological, Cultural, and Economic Transformation." I was asked, "What it's like to live outside the system today -- how does this really look?" Piquing their interest was my ending paragraph:

The alternative to the faltering "Society," the love tribe, has been practiced long before the hippies began the Back to the Land movement at People's Park, Berkeley, in 1969.

Today, some of us still live so as to constructively undermine the dominant system, living outside it as much as possible. We thereby hasten -- at least by example -- the end of the corporate economy and the U.S. as we know it. We are messengers and preservers of viable natural systems. We stand for nonviolence, and thus support a truly sustainable culture. Perhaps at best we are showing the way modestly and minimally, through a tough transformation beyond the settling of the dust.

I have made an attempt at this assignment in two parts. Part 1, below, starts with the disturbing facts underlying our state of affairs in today's increasingly uncertain world. If we are asking people to think deeply and take action, a radical critique needs to be grasped. Since we're not limiting ourselves to examining lifestyles outside the system by acknowledging those deliberately houseless persons somehow surviving on the streets, we need to address the materially comfortable as well. All walks of life face massive change that has just begun. Before getting to details of living outside the system, I needed first to identify the whole, ugly truth of our circumstances. Then in Part 2, "Bringing to Life a Transformative Culture," specifics are presented. - Jan Lundberg, Culture Change

Getting There

Part 1: Awakening from the U.S. Delusion

At this juncture in humanity's story fraught with danger and destruction, the crisis needs to be addressed forthrightly. To the extent possible, we do so with a positive vision for improvement in our lives. Individually we need to liberate our minds from the propaganda and myths of the dominant culture. Collectively we need to understand we are leaving the economy of expansion.

You have most likely compromised yourself to fit into a system that opposes the reverence of life. You don't want to believe that corporate employers and politicians are as stupid and harmful as anything that could possibly be. You would rather be swayed by the assuaging media to somehow hope for a better world -- and if possible get more sex and do more shopping tomorrow. No one is supposed to get excited about anything except as a voter fearing change. Muslim garb appearing in a suburban mall would by now scare many a U.S. consumer.

Without positive change that goes to the root of problems, what you are working at and dreaming for is no more than a continuation of "The Matrix," or the programmed, domesticated life, a.k.a. Babylon.

So an amazing child thus becomes old and unimaginative, considered fortunate to pass through the turnstile of life's amusement park to grab some jollies approved by the masters on high. Work is imposed as the only way to survive and enjoy the false freedom of acquiring material things. Taking pride in work is to thank the slave driver for whipping you.

To watch much television or be uncritically impressed by cell phones and Facebook is to be fooled by glitz. Superficial relationship with things as substitutes for love and nature gets us nowhere except to overflowing landfills. Harvesting the methane of landfills makes it okay for those who don't know we are riding the rails toward an historic train wreck.

Caught up in the details of oppression and selling out, manufactured distractions and fear keep coming. People adopt illusions such as democracy and a better president to save them. The tendency to join in bowing down to the powerful has made wild humans living their own lives practically extinct. It is a rare thinker today who steps back from the popular illusion to see patterns such as genocide for profit. The millions of civilians killed by dozens of U.S. wars and "police actions" since "the good war" (WWII) are outside the frame of reference for the gullible citizenry. Surrounding the few independent-minded are the ever more victimized, oblivious masses who exhibit that they are sleepwalking off a cliff.

For a majority of modern people to think for themselves, the façade of plastic civilization has to topple and shatter. Thorough collapse will happen of its own accord, no matter if many who actually think for themselves take the bigger step of taking action.

The name of the game, while the system still features high profits for WalMart, for example, is to awaken from the delusion of the U.S. At least one can do this in his or her mind and thus be prepared for imminent economic collapse. Then one might do more by helping to strengthen the basis for tomorrow's re-formed society.

But why awaken if it is to just see modern society for what it is, without the veneer of "progress" and minimal freedoms? No matter how disappointing or painful the view of stark reality may be, there has to be a positive vision for a real existence. But the idea of an "alternative" places undue legitimacy on what today passes for normal. So the dream of good living, peace and a healthy biosphere is the only sensible "default" position.

There are many damaged people who deny that things can get better. They buy into the idea of an all-powerful elite that will always thwart peace and justice. In this all-too-common and pessimistic view, oil supply scenarios are offered by negative, fearful observers to back up the expectation of intensifying fascism. To try to correct them in their misunderstanding of oil-supply dynamics and energy can be a waste of time because of their sometimes arrogant or sad attitudes. For they have given up on human nature rather than the current dominant culture that's an aberration.

A visionary well versed in the realism of today's dominant system must live as the model for any positive social change, both during pre-collapse and when society is being reconstituted for a sustainable culture.

Leaving the economy of expansion

The petroleum infrastructure should be shut down, in an orderly fashion ideally, to save the climate and foster community living. Coal and nuclear power would thus be shut down too as they are part of the petroleum infrastructure.

Growth must no longer be encouraged. So far the message of peak oil is not quite heard or heeded. Telling the no-growth future is to tell people that no more of us will be getting richer. This strikes at the heart of "freedom" as expressed by love of private property, greed, and capitalist opportunity. The damage from growth is kept quiet by the industrialists, speculators and other opportunists and exploiters. But since it is obvious enough, one would think that such a threat to life would be widely recognized. But almost no one can name anyone in the Degrowth movement.

Some believe in violent resistance to the corporate state. But they are so few and unorganized that it is a waste of time to even point out to them that economic and ecological collapse is in the driver's seat. More promising is the Gandhian approach of nonviolent resistance and non-cooperation for opposing the corporate state and forming a sustainable society based on justice.

Describing collapse can be as difficult as describing the post-collapse world. One way toward doing the latter is to look forward to something that disappears. A casualty of collapse on the positive side of the ledger is the disappearance of English as the global or second language. Native tongues will reassert themselves. Loss of languages has been in the hundreds in the past several decades alone, and with them went traditional cultures and ancient wisdom. The progressers don't mind this at all, when they can still take jet vacations to Italy, for example.

Seen on Highway 101 north of Solvang: the U.S. flag is prominently emblazoned on a lumbering Cox Petroleum Transport truck, with the motto "Pulling for America." The maker of the transport is none other than Heil.

Polluters frequently invoke the flag and nation to justify their practices and keep patriotic citizens from questioning what the nation actually stands for. What exactly is the America that the oil company is pulling for? Is it little more than an outmoded concept that remains a threat to the entire world? If so, this does not mean there aren't many wonderful Americans in a land of still beautiful landscapes. But if they believe in petroleum (or some alternative, because "they will think of something") as a long-term source of energy and materials, they are woefully ignorant. It is ignorance and its symptoms (e.g., obesity, waste, belief in popular myths) that both compromise Earth's life support system and close off any awareness of fundamental change.

These paramount issues don't get 1/100th of the attention that "terrorism" gets. The average person may believe that four Department of Homeland Security commandos with shiny black SUVs need to be swaggering around the sleepy Santa Barbara Amtrak station. Whilst some might have been comforted that an Al Qaeda package could not get past the tough officers (who didn't do anything but chuckle and kill time and show weapons to protect us), some wondered if the expensive security was doing anything more than putting travelers on edge. If the economy is supposed to thrive, George W. Bush's prescription for freedom immediately after 9-11 -- "Go shopping" -- should not be dampened by no end of "security."

Doesn't it make more sense that the nation's elite have set up the "security state" -- an aspect of the military industrial complex that President Eisenhower warned us against in his parting words -- mainly to intimidate us? The elite fears the people, as it should. The average person does not like working hard for little, seeing the top 1% of the population own 50% of the material wealth.

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SEE PART 2 and both parts' References and Further Reading list at Getting There (Part 2): Bringing to Life a Transformative Culture by Jan Lundberg