Coping or running when nothing's working

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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From my vantage point at Culture Change I receive many inquiries about where to go for a better life. (This is partly because people believe I still live in rural Humboldt County, whereas I've been based in the San Francisco Bay area lately.) Almost as often, I get letters from people who have found homes where they commune more with nature and are outside the bounds of stressful, modern society.

These "runners" from civilization know they have not truly escaped the world's crises and threats: climate chaos, petrocollapse-related violence, or nuclear war. They may or may not be communitarians or ecologically minded, but if they aren't they wouldn't normally read Culture Change or write to us.

Of the people definitely not making such moves or living in a new-found haven, they are either the downtrodden, poorly informed citizenry -- the masses of mostly workers -- or they are the rare and aware who are riding out the storm that's brewing. Some of these latter types believe they can tough it out and keep being the top dogs, and use their money to escape social upheaval. Others who are just as aware may be trapped by material deprivation, no options, and lack of family -- such that they cannot do anything other than try to survive day to day or month to month in "Babylon." To cope.

Culture Change readers can be described, like the general population, as either coping with the system or running from it. The number of us fighting the system (or working hard to replace it with a model based on love, cooperation and respect for nature) is probably statistically insignificant. The general population is much more on the coping side of the ledger than running from the system, let alone dismantling it. If you believe running is wrong because one can "make it" through persistence and prayer or whatever, such faith is hard to shake. At least consider that the runners are doing something good for all of us by cutting their consumption and making less money to pay taxes for wars. And they're setting up outposts, perhaps, for others to benefit from when people follow.

If you believe that one should not run from the system because we must fight it right in the belly of the beast, or if you believe that to save the world we must be right where the need is greatest, amidst the ignorance and the pollution, then "Bless you." Keep cooking up the vegan dishes for Food Not Bombs, attend all the rallies, lock down at protests and get arrested, create guerilla urban gardens, and ride your bike. What have you. But more than likely such a stance stems from not having any children, or from a lack of connection to a better place with more nature that one would really prefer to run to.

Some of us prefer the sophistication and complexity of the city, while others just want the countryside. There are some who believe cities will be better off than rural areas as petrocollaspe comes on. The effects will probably be surprising, but here's a scenario from Albert Bates, author of The Post-Petroleum Survival Guide and Cookbook, special to Culture Change this week: "As the crunch deepens, the rural folk are better situated. They will be the first to lose power, transport and internet, but the last to lose food and water. Which would you rather

have?"

Hard-core urban activists admirably fight the system with all the brake dust, tire dust, ground-layer ozone, and particulate-matter soot that they can tolerate -- for a while. These are usually young people who think their health can withstand an unnatural lifestyle, and besides, there are more opportunities to get laid and enjoy whatever other jollies the larger cities have to offer. Nothing wrong with this, as the Babylon-based activists are indeed cheating the system and are inspiring others.

This must not be discounted. Joy welling up from the soul, as when people dance to a live primal beat, is a big part of our special animal power. People expressing themselves creatively without vested interest or authority is actually our normal condition that we have almost lost. I saw it come back on Sunday at the first anniversary party of the tree-sit at the University of California in Berkeley. Talented performance-artists devoting themselves to a cause and working together, for free to enlighten the public, is inspiring.

We are entering a late phase of Western Civilization, particularly in the frazzled, bankrupt United Paved Precincts of America (UPPA = USA). Pressures to pay higher and higher costs -- on many levels -- seem unavoidable, and people are barely able to manage it. The pace accelerates and "quality time" becomes harder to find. The stress and the distractions from scurrying around to survive and keep a household at minimum operating level are mostly why people do not take the time to get together and discuss major problems. New crises and challenges present themselves daily, such that the biggest injustices threatening our very lives -- climate chaos, declining health, and the effects of imperialist wars -- cannot be dealt with when worrying about making the rent or the mortgage and affording enough food and petroleum.

For more and more of us, the system is not working. Period. Too much is wrong with our lives at the hands of fellow citizens desperate to get ahead or merely survive. It seems we can more easily run into a beggar, a mugger or a sleazy lawyer, as meet a happy, satisfied, healthy person who has a lot to give and share. The list of things to worry about and deal with, because we seem to have no choice, is long and sad. Health problems from tainted food, water and air, exacerbated by medical care that is oriented toward attacking symptoms through intervention, are enough to kill you or your loved ones -- and take you to the poor house too.

The question becomes, "What do we do, then, when nothing's working?" Author Daniel Quinn has advocated that we must walk away from Western Civilization and the whole broken system. The recent documentary, What a Way to Go - Life at the End of Empire, concludes that we have to build or obtain boats together and leave the shore of certain destruction, and head for the unknown. Certainly, the runaway train analogy of the movie resonates with anyone closely paying attention to the climate news and the tenuous financial system.

Here's what Culture Change has advocated, even though it's usually treated as something premature or too inconvenient by those in thrall to the System God. And some of us are too cynical and pessimistic for our own good, to believe in a positive future of our own making. Here goes:

Lifestyle change that bleeds the corporate economy to death is a major part of the "solution" -- if there is any solution to our predicament. We need a break with the past, a culture change. What about going part way for now? It is possible to contribute to a project so beautifully radical and world-changing, yet simultaneously live a lifestyle that contradicts it. But not for long.

For those who can hear the whole message and follow it, and help lead us in this liberating process, a special status is conferred. Unfortunately, common sense and a little moxie or bravery at this time of unprecedented crisis is rare, such that one may as well ask oneself: "Am I so special to stand out from the sheople on their way to the slaughter, and take my future into my own hands, and live life to the fullest?" Being able to ask that question is half the battle, so one should take credit for being smarter and wiser than the products society has created known as consumers.

It is past time to reject the star-spangled myth of "America's greatness" and "know-how" when we look at the gross failure of allowing another Vietnam War, this time in Iraq and Afghanistan. We have also allowed corporate CEOs to "earn" hundreds of times the wages of average hard-working people who have no hope of a comfortable retirement or decent health care. The African-American minority is slipping downward in income and available services. The prison population is a slave nation. And, there's the climate. There's the climate! "We're number one!" Then we let China's destruction of our planet surpass the U.S. as the top greenhouse-gas emitter, as we buy mountains of consumer crap from the other side of the globe. We could have lived without it. We're plasticizing the seas and our bodies. It's out of control. So is overpopulation, about which nothing's being done to humanely turn around.

Things can no longer be fixed.

One-hundred dollar-a-barrel oil, tens of thousands of nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert, the fresh water supplies being depleted in a drunken frenzy of waste, nothing being done to stop the single-occupant driver going around in a huge SUV to buy a quart of animal secretions -- the list goes on. These are not "complaints" or "negativity," but facts that people are aware of, at least unconsciously or subconsciously. Who in the United Paved Precincts of America does not feel the almighty Dollar (or Euro) is running our lives -- into the ground?

The only thing that can happen toward fixing things and seeing some semblance of life survive is a tumultuous change in the status quo. The system is destroying itself, but it's taking too much down with it as its death throes violently shudder. I refer you to resources of information below, including Culture Change Letters; they point the way to system replacement, both in the taking down and the rebuilding: Thank you for doing your part. Enjoy your time while you're here, whether that's in the gritty city, out in the boonies, or on a sailboat. Keep those emails and letters coming to our little organization, and help spread the word by sharing these Culture Change Letters with anyone able to understand.

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Further Reading:

Editor's note: the first four links that follow are for reports that may be the only ones in over 170 published on this website (since 2002) that pertain roughly to coping or running. Some others, in which I discussed the DIY movement and hipsters without territory, also have a bearing on the topic. This suggests that there should be more essays in future on the practical theme of coping or running as the system starts to blow fuses and melt down. - JL, San Francisco

"Where's your ecovillage as meltdown approaches?" by Jan Lundberg, August, 2005, Culture Change Letter #139:

culturechange.org

"Petrocollapse: Can you live without indoor running water?" by Jan Lundberg, June 27, 2005, Culture Change Letter #101:

culturechange.org

"Ways to end car culture along with the globalized trade godzilla": articles by Jan Lundberg and Julian Darley, March 11, 2005, Culture Change Letter #89:

culturechange.org

"A strange feeling as a way of life - Making sense of our predicament, shaping our future"
by Jan Lundberg, October 14, 2007, Culture Change Letter #169:

culturechange.org

Albert Bates interview in Culture Change:

Ecovillage Training Center, at The Farm, Tennessee:

thefarm.org

City Repair, Portland's land use revolution:

cityrepair.org

"Depaving the World" by Richard Register:

culturechange.org

"How to create a pedestrian mall" by Michelle Wallar:

culturechange.org

Suburban redesign and renewal: the work of Jan Spencer, Culture Changer in Eugene, Oregon, in documentary series:
Peak Moment: "Suburban Renewal - One Backyard at a Time"
globalpublicmedia.com

The U.C. Berkeley tree-sit:

Saveoaks.com

Audio or video show: "Jan Lundberg opens by singing 'Have A Global Warming Day' and closes with 'The Depaver's Song.' In between is an unabashed look at climate distortion, peak oil, and declining ecosystems, all bringing a necessary collapse of our "pigging out" economy. He envisions a future with radically curtailed energy use, and people coming together groping for local solutions" Peak Moment TV:

globalpublicmedia.com