

Ten unfortunate assumptions of energy addicts

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This is a message on record crude and gasoline prices to oil addicts (Hello!). I include their close cousins the green energy addicts (Ciao!). This is prompted by the shallow, momentary news-analyses of the oil market, as well as by the slightly less-shallow boosterism of a green-energy Utopia. Lend me your ears before I say, "Have a global warming day" and we go our separate ways. I'd like to think I'm moving to the country or the high seas.

I want to say "Hey" to the endangered American gas guzzler and all manner of major oil burner, and, "Hail ye plastic-consuming, tax-funding supporters of never-ending war! You've been driving up a storm, whether Operation Desert Storm or the next Katrina." The few who aren't driving are marginalized like Cassandras -- usually considered losers. Our hearts go out to one and all, for the (c)rude awakening has barely begun.

Some have pondered what it means for pump prices to get past \$4 a gallon and for oil prices to get to \$135 a barrel. Continuing to ponder away has, significantly, resulted in no action other than be forced to cut back on some expenditures. Your habits and thinking haven't changed, but they will shortly. This is a heads-up on what goes on with the oil industry; it might help, for there is more than meets the eye that affects everyone. What's in store for us all, energy-wise and for our very survival?

"You know something is happening here, but you don't know what it is/Do you Mr. Jones" – Bob Dylan, Ballad of a Thin Man, 1965

Our collective problem as we see the world sputter out of control for the worse (before it gets better) is largely that so many loud mouths claim to know what IS happening here. Honest and wise assessments of what all is really going on are hard to come by, partly because the corporate media suppress independent voices who may have the background and objectivity to offer clarity.

There are several major assumptions blinding most of those who try, within the confines of the dominant culture and "The System," to grasp trends and glimpse the future:

- 1) Oil supplies will diminish gradually now that peak extraction has arrived.
- 2) Alternative fuels and renewable energy can replace our petroleum consumption.
- 3) The petroleum infrastructure can last or become renewable-energy based.
- 4) Technology is the equivalent of energy, and energy is energy (all the same).
- 5) Today's population of consumers has something to fall back on if and when petroleum-grown/distributed food and petroleum-pumped water disappear.
- 6) Government and scientists can see us through this challenge and save us.
- 7) "The market" and "entrepreneurial innovation" offer salvation for our unraveling social fabric and our destruction of the ecosystem.
- 8) Climate change will be gradual and be reflected accurately by numerical averages.

9) The U.S. population can cope with anything and is at an advantage over other countries especially as scarcity and adversity mount.

10) The “wars” in Iraq and Afghanistan are winnable or can be put behind us with elections, and that the waste of lives and wealth on these wars can be absorbed.

Baby, here are the debunking facts on the above, in order:

1. The oil industry and the oil market are, like the global corporate economy, not set up for contraction. Enough of a shortage will sink the whole ship.
2. Petroleum has no substitute, neither for all its uses nor for the cheapness of the bygone days of rising supply. “Unlimited” petroleum created the growth and abundance we’ve known. The main alternatives are just for electricity and have far lower energy yield than the easily extracted, cheap petroleum of yore.
3. The petroleum infrastructure is hard-wired and decaying rapidly. A replacement-alternative needed to be created decades ago to avoid industrial and economic collapse.
4. Energy comes at a physical cost (entropy) and has been exploited according to convenience at hand. Continuing to wish for a free lunch to power our endless consumption may yield gee-wizz technologies, but there are too many weak links in the supply chain (metals, petroleum, uranium). “Externalities” such as environmental degradation come home to roost with, for example, the cancer epidemic.
5. People are basically eating petroleum as part of modern agriculture’s industrialization and scale dedicated only to profit. Ten units of fossil energy are needed today to create one unit of food-calorie energy, and that does not include transportation or food preparation. The average piece of food in the U.S. has to travel 1,500 miles from its point of origin.
6. Government is not really in control of the gigantic, complex systems it has unleashed for its Big Business constituency. Corruption, incompetence and ignorance prevail, and reflect the dominant culture of materialism and private wealth – at odds with any spirit of citizen-cooperation for the public good. Katrina and Rita were only ameliorated by individual and grassroots volunteerism.
7. Making more money and relying on ever-advancing technology is the basis of not only green consumerism but the promise of a “new economy” that is really just more of the same: a disconnect with ecology.
8. Global warming is already out of control, as positive feedback loops have kicked in. The tipping points, accompanied by mass extinction already underway, are inescapable and are characterized over geological time by sudden, total flips to new states not seen on Earth perhaps for the last 55 million years. It has always been true that Mother Nature knows no restraint.
9. The average U.S. citizen has become far softer than our tough forebears who worked the land and could create and repair anything their lives depended upon. Crucial skills have been lost along with community. Most other countries have been called impoverished, but even after being ravaged by corporate and government manipulation, they remain — compared to Northern Americans -- close to the land, and their peoples retain family cohesion.
10. The cost of the Iraq War alone has approached half a trillion dollars and is projected to cost over three trillion in the long run. Far more significant is the death and destruction that, although tragic and incalculable already, will persist for generations. The use of depleted uranium amounts to a nuclear war that the average U.S. citizen knows nothing about, as if one is not affected on this side of the world.

One could add to the list and go far beyond ten. My May 22, 2008 essay on Ecocities (Culture Change Letter #185)

contains explanation on the workings of the oil industry and the oil market, helping to inform the seeker.

We do not have an energy crisis or a financial crisis, but rather a culture crisis. The above regrettable assumptions cover most of the attitudinal confusion and error that prevent modern consumers from understanding their own lives. Automatic acceptance of technology, and chauvinism for the Red-White-and-Blue, with some religious faith thrown in, are leading all of us -- humanity and innocent species that we drive extinct -- to what may be oblivion. If this sounds too dire to be possible, look at the direction we are going in, and do the math.

“Hope” is a human trait that we cannot live without, but it can be dangerous to over-rely on. What are we hoping for? Continued affluence for those who slave away, or compete or exploit, so that our homes can be spacious and loaded with electronic convenience?

Why should the loss of our doodads and energy profligacy be considered “doom and gloom?” This column has tried to dispel that false claim since Culture Change’s beginning in 2001, by exploring values enhanced by fundamental change. Some of us have tasted the fruits of truly sustainable living and equitable relationships. We will not restate here the “solutions” or “the answer” that many demand upon realizing profound change is in the offing.

People who are locked into their conventionalism and the collapsing paradigm are afraid to question their own life-styles and their rulers, such that a further-trashed natural world is preferable to taking action that involves uncertainty. Their “System” is sacrosanct, but perhaps society is on the verge of seeing widespread questioning of The System and its demise at the hands of the many.

I used to provide the hungry news media with regular announcements and analyses on U.S. gasoline prices. Seeing the boring pointlessness and the ethical toxic-hole of supplying solace and profitable information to the motoring public and my major oil-company clients, I left. The “truth business” I went into, that of researching and developing alternatives to the dominant forms of transportation, land-use, has been lucrative only in the spiritual sense, one might say. I trot out this background to assure anyone that there is no refuge in playing the game of materialistic “\$uccess,” because sooner or later one comes up empty. And, the rewards of opening one’s eyes and meeting people on equal terms of real respect are vast.

I close with my explanation of what we are experiencing and what’s about to hit. I offer a warning and some hope.

We are caught in a culture of denial and ruination: of our rights as humans and animals, and of the absolute interdependence of humans and the rest of nature. Too many of us want to believe the propaganda that brainwashed us as “THE Americans,” regarding our being the most special and justly proud of nations -- never mind the inextricable bases of slavery and the genocide of the native peoples. This is not to say there are not amazingly wonderful Americans today. Nor do we forget we have unique wonders of natural beauty such as the Grand Canyon.

But our phase of history whereby our “exuberance,” as William Catton called our “Overshoot,” is coming to an end more swiftly than some of us thought even a few years ago. The world is turning upside down for better AND for worse. The days of pumping gas and flicking a switch are going to be all but forgotten when we lurch desperately toward more human, “convivial” interaction (as Ivan Illich described our next possible phase). That is, if we do not go extinct from our releasing the chemical and radioactive genies into the world. Gone will be the days of further such atrocities done without the permission of all affected.

If we pull through, we will live in such a way to reject false values, idiocies and greedy tendencies that have dragged us all down. This hegemony has at least accelerated its own demise and helped to close the chapter on a bloody period that began many centuries ago. Now it is time for us to open up the doors and go outside to our freedom. Don’t wait for the talking heads or bosses or politicians to give you permission. Just tell them “Have a global warming day.”

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