The critical eye - for the nightmare and the dream

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Recent rises in oil prices help more of us perceive that something's very wrong with what we've built and paved and sprayed. Anyone taking a look around can feel overwhelmed by the sprawling petroleum infrastructure, especially if the observer has any sense for its fragility or impermanence. Becoming worried or sickened is a sane response. Some also realize how we have been suffocated and brainwashed to see little else than the mass illusion and the spoon-fed image of a similar green-consuming future.

Then there are those who are hungry right now around the world, protesting unprecedented fuel and food costs. These protesters will not back down. Regimes will not only topple, as government rule will dissolve for better or worse. This is eventually coming to the USA too, and to all nations, because when masses of people anywhere experience instability, and business-as-usual comes to a halt, the global economy affects all -- rapidly and painfully as it fails.

Somehow this vulnerability has been sold as "wealth" and "progress." While it dawns on some of us that the materialist world is stripped naked before us, die-hards still believe "prosperity" can be had widely -- although it never came for anyone but the few who gluttonize non-renewable resources. The end result of the growing conflict will be, after the likely bloodletting, a return to local economics and real community. Meanwhile, the mess is right outside our window and has me thinking:

It takes an unpopular critical eye to see the ubiquitous, utter waste and be hit by the folly. The motor-vehicle oriented landscape and all the businesses and properties depend on dwindling, ever-more costly petroleum for their usually needless products and services. These unsustainable establishments are in our face and keep us hemmed in our mental prison. Like a giant bloodsucker it is something we ignore as if it were a necessary appendage of civilized evolution.

Human relations can be conscious

Humanity is only now about to wake up to the dead-end of petroleum-fueled exuberance (as William Catton called our lifestyle in his 1980 book Overshoot). In so doing, people will not be able to help but realize also that their social relations have also been an embarrassing sham -- neither enlightened nor just. Can there be another way? It is more than a dream.

When love is relegated to romantic fantasy (of the honeymoon, say) or familial duty (mainly feeding one's children and packing them off to be educated by strangers), we miss most of life's opportunity for loving and for sharing positive experiences with unlimited numbers of people we can meet. We are deprived of this not by "human nature" but by the narrow, controlled and repressive society we know to be all about private property and individual gain. We are expected to find a semblance of love only behind our own walls. Within our worship halls' walls it's hardly worth calling love when authority judges us. It does so illegitimately.

Creativity is the norm underneath

Poets and other artists and revolutionaries should not be the only ones to see through the barren, ordered construct of the market economy and what it has done to our natural surroundings and souls. The full potential of beautiful creating that every person is capable of every day can be realized only if we somehow all abandon or remove the technological (=artificial) system that has already failed us. Through it we have not only let down one another, but also our fellow creatures. They are, we sometimes find when we are open enough, lovely and pure of spirit -- life itself. Their wildness is their enviable simplicity and superiority, and is the source of undying admiration for those of us who know there are chains around us that choke off clear thought and feeling. Most of us moderns vainly imagine ourselves created above all other species -- above life itself! But each of the countless species occupies successfully an essential niche in our

common ecosystem. Yes, we can destroy them -- but we only destroy ourselves, as we are just barely beginning to find out. Our aim, to a critical eye, seems only to gain short-term, mindless comfort. Even as we achieve a mass extinction for the future fossil record, we prove our "superiority."

To write this makes me feel something more real and permanent than what's possible when being overwhelmed by the outrageously ugly corporate eateries and stores here along Interstate 5 in Washington State. I'm on a large shuttle bus en route to transfer to a car and a train. Though I am as separate from "The System" as one can be and still be connected to the "mainstream," I wish I were escaping like a native American once could, less than 150 years ago -- to lands beyond the white invaders.

The critical eye that some of us utilize is curiously rare in this age of denial as the American Dream bursts with it's unintended toxic excrement. I'm past imagining any acceleration of terminating the "global warming machine" (i.e., industrial society), because I face that people are still far from seeing the need to change their way of life. They are not ready to storm city hall or the television stations; instead they will storm the supermarkets and palaces of the rich.

Why that's inevitable: people remain either unexposed to alternatives to ecocide and their own oppression, or, even when they have been introduced, they stubbornly reject seriously participating in conserving energy and non-renewable materials. Imagine that! Instead, they hand over some more dollars to corporations for discretionary items. Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one to almost vomit from the harsh reality of our impotence, evil, apathy, and needless self-destruction.

Offering "a solution" to our ills and predicament is impossible, and it has been so for probably centuries -- although stamping out the emerging dominant culture of greed and exploitation would have been easier long ago. Perhaps it would even have been a trivial task if the first mutation of neolithic culture, changing into what would soon become Western Civilization, were nipped in the bud. Instead, the mistake (or crime) was allowed to proliferate into mass selfishness enshrined especially for the most aggressive and cruel among us.

Curtains

How did we keep allowing a vicious yet self-gratifying system to rule over us generation after generation, even when we rebelled? One way was to appeal to our superiority as young things, swollen with fancy knowledge and technology. We pitied the older generations who didn't have our technical abilities. We laughed that ancestors had no telephones -- how quaint and pathetic of them! If only they had been able to enjoy what we know and do.

Except, instead, each new modern generation is in reality more ignorant and weaker than the previous. More information does not a great human make, nor does it serve to nurture and protect one's family. To the contrary, we find.

As we have run up against the end of the automobile age -- no more running around in sleek comfort -- we are starting to feel anxious about even being able to have any transportation at all, or a livable environment in which to do it. As we see desperate industries trying to hang on in their gargantuan and overstretched states, trying to become more energy-efficient to survive, the realization hits: At this point in our abuse of Mother Earth and waste of nonrenewable energy, if we persist in manufacturing any kind of car or airplane on a mass scale, we flush our ecosystem and climate down the toilet.

As my father used to say, be of good cheer. Change is coming soon, and it's far deeper and mind-blowing than Barack Obama is hinting at.

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Reflections from Le Bon

After discussion the above essay with Bill Le Bon, consultant for Culture Change, we had a discussion that resulted in this statement (mostly by him and partly by me, JL):

People are busy working for the man because they get the house, wife, car and food. They give their day to the man but get to come back to the wife and kids. They resent and yet appreciate what the man provides. But they don’t question why they want the house, wife and car. If they did they might not want it. If people kept in mind that food and water and shelter should be free, their politics would be different. But much of what’s out in the world is scary, such as homelessness, and keeps people from learning about alternatives. To embrace the margin requires believing in a better way based on much information and visible examples of would be viable options. If they were obvious, people would drop out from working for the man. They’re out there, but the media don’t cover it and keeps bombarding people with messages to consume. It takes profit-generation to get media. Money and power are goals in themselves and have their adherents. The people with values don’t have power or money.

Jan Lundberg, founder of Culture Change, was a well-known oil-industry analyst when he changed over to nonprofit

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