Let's talk about the enemy

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Is Russia our enemy? Is the world living in Pax Americana? I don't feel much peace these days, and in my 56 years I don't believe I've been truly free or secure. There's supposedly peace if one does not have to see war directly -- while paying taxes for too many weapons and atrocities and calling it "Defense."

Matthew Simmons, the petroleum-industry investment banker, in a presentation on peak oil to a mostly Pentagon-employee audience in 2006, said, regarding wars over energy and out of control oil consumption, "Maybe we don't know who the enemy is. Maybe the enemy is us."

When we are hurtling over the ecological cliff like motorized lemmings, to paraphrase cartoonist Andy Singer, there are some leading the charge. Some of us "lemmings" are not even motorized, and indeed there are many poor people who are in the way of "progress" and schemes to develop nature out of existence a little bit more.

Also among us are objectors, dissidents, revolutionaries or radicals who may put up resistance to ecocide and genocide. The government has impressive power to neutralize them, but it's in the name of "law enforcement," "security" or "anti-terrorism." They are also ridiculed or marginalized, sometimes in the fashion of tolerance to prove we have freedom of speech. Foes can also be turned into enemies for the people to fear by dehumanizing them, such as with racist terms.

There are indeed dangerous, crazy and bad people that society must be protected from. With so many people on the Earth we need laws, jails and rehabilitation to keep ourselves in line. (The question of wrongly jailing some, and failing to jail the truly deserving, are extremely important issues that nevertheless may not go to the heart of the matter.) When a system is bent on destruction of the planet for the short-term gain of the financially mighty, and has a vast apparatus to enforce the status quo, something has to give. Whether it will be a successful rebellion or system failure from within, we don't know. If we are like too many rats in a cage, problems inevitably arise and are amplified.

Who or what is the enemy? Is it the consumer in the mirror? Is it mainly the automaton following -- lacking compassion or ethical framework -- instructions and training of a corporation or government agency?

Or is the enemy in your life the physically attractive person you think you need? Or is your enemy of the moment perhaps someone you took under your wing, boosting your ego? Where are you being led by your desires and alliances? Are you not just your own enemy but others' as well, as conflict arose from too much "Western doing" (to compare East-West philosophies)?

Why should there be an enemy at all? We've all heard that thinking negative thoughts creates exactly what you would like to avoid. This is in part because physics' laws include the effect of the observer's mere presence and intent to observe.

Let us cease the philosophical masturbation and get down to the fact that we are under threat. You are under threat. The extent that you feel it to be true may depend on the convenience and insulation you've achieved by working hard and selling out. We do it in oh-so-many ways and close our eyes to our actions and their meaning. Anything goes in today's lawless world where the order of the day is diversionary entertainment, materialism, acceptance of unceasing destruction of nature, and abandoning traditional respect for elders and time-honored cultures. Such lawlessness is our enemy.

As good as any place to start looking at our actions in the undeniable context of our industrial system is our manufactured products. Most sane people would agree that nuclear waste is intolerable and a tragic mistake. But these same people, including agitators for peace, are not ready to face the fact that they are contributing daily to your and my chance of getting cancer. I refer to plastics. Culture Change published a feature on this threat in 2004 called "Plastics: Your formidable enemy." You could also say that all the Chinese products cramming our stores and your home are your enemy. If they aren't made of plastic, they were transported with petroleum that is the basis of plastics. Closer to home: "If you bought it, a truck brought it." (a sign off of Interstate 5). So is the truck or trucker the enemy? How can that be true as we hold ourselves blameless as buyers?

Perhaps you're one of Culture Change's haphazard readers who hate us. You think some of your fellow countrymen/women are your enemy because they may not look or sound like you, or perhaps you are outraged that they may question the government's policies. Peaceniks, commies, gays, and many other minorities are deemed the enemy

by the "normal" citizen who sees red at the thought of others exercising freedom or calling for restrictions on the "freedom" to develop the hell out of nature.

Yet, at bottom we are all the same and need to find common, sacred ground. An example: When your techno toys go wrong and skewer you, wasting your time, making you want to smash the machine, technology seems to be your enemy. Getting shocked to death, or a car part going bad and causing a fatal crash -- technology's clearly your enemy. But in reality we have created and embraced this self-destructive world and behavior, so we are our own worst enemy. It's an old adage. But what good does it do to simply pronounce ourselves guilty of doing ourselves in? That would be nothing new. What is new is each day, and to decide what or who the enemy is if that's appropriate.

For some of us, particularly of the canine species, when seeing someone in uniform a feeling wells up that says "that's the enemy." It of course depends on the role of the organization (e.g., division of government) and the individual. The occasional trouble with good people who are soldiers or police is that they follow orders -- good and bad orders. Heinous crimes are frequently committed by those supposedly fighting crime and defending us from “evil.” Yet most of us still haven't learned (or we forget) that following orders is no defense against the charge of war crimes. One way the higher-ups protect themselves is to refrain from making examples of lower ranking soldiers' atrocities. In 2002, according to an investigation by McClatchy newspapers, "U.S. soldiers beat two Afghan detainees ... to death as they hung by their wrists. One of the detainees was beaten on one leg so many times that the tissue was 'falling apart and had basically been pulpified,'.... Extreme abuse was not isolated but 'routine' and 'systematic'." [Miller-McCune magazine, Aug. 2008]

It's all well and good to try to crack down on torture and other war crimes, but if we don't look at the underlying motivation for a war, we are wasting time and guaranteeing the next war and wave of atrocities. Modern wars have arguably all been wars over resources. This means markets for selling the mineral wealth, for example, existing in one country coveted by another country (or by foreign elements such as transnational corporations). One view is that it’s about thugs in suits and uniforms taking what they want with the aid of pretexts, probably out of fear.

Some social critics believe war and oppression happen because we don't get enough love and sex individually. There's truth to this, and I for one eagerly await progress in that regard! (This is the subject of a future Culture Change essay by sexologist peace-activists.)

Meanwhile, what is the structure causing and justifying organized aggression? Is war basically terrorism with official budgets? I believe the basic root cause is commercialism. Capitalism. Greed. In an essay I wrote in 2003, I explored this ("Is the market The Enemy?") in this column.

Stepping way back from the intricacies of our species' challenge of survival today, some of us have a flash of realization that there must be a religious sort of awakening to honor and defend the Earth. As long as we can get away with destruction of life for our own grandiose schemes -- beyond the minimum taking of life so that we may eat and survive -- we will have constant crime and conflict. And at this rate it's terminal for humanity and untold numbers of our fellow species.

-- Aug. 16, 2008

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"Is the market The Enemy? - Eco-philosophical search for core of truth" by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #16:

culturechange.org

"Plastics: Your formidable enemy - Questioning exposure, recycling, biodegradability, alternatives" by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change e-Letter #70:

culturechange.org

Andy Singer's fantastic cartoons:

andysinger.com

"Truth With Consequences: Why both political parties should support a truth commission on the human rights abuses of

the war on terror" by John Mecklin, Miller-McCune magazine:

miller-mccune.com