Who Shall Inherit the Earth Upon Our Crash?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
29 October 2008

Culture Change Letter #207 --
Portland sustainability, personal responsibility, and the prospect for oil's full return in today's U.S. culture

As I walk around Portland, Ore., one of the most progressive cities in the U.S., I ponder the end of life as we know it -- without all these machines humming that enable so much of our separateness and insanity. Rather than as a dreamer, I do my pondering as someone told by long time readers and even foundation heads that I've been on the right track for many years. But what comforts me most is being a car-free person who has rejected with all his might the consumer economy, such that I might be a survivor in the post-crash world.

It is upsetting to ponder a significant dip in our population size -- probably from petroleum supply crash-induced famine -- when it's unplanned and not gradual. But still I wonder who else will likely survive, besides the proverbial cockroaches that will inherit the Earth when we go down in flames, and I come up with other car-free folk such as street people. The ones who aren't too deranged have a leg up on survival.

The financial and economic crash we are all starting to see is like a car crash -- suddenly it's undeniably in front of us, and we sense we're going to feel something major soon. We may hold out hope to veer away, but we know we've been going too fast and spewing out that gasoline for speed and to get ahead. Meanwhile, do we bother to ask one of those slower moving survivors -- the non-deranged street person -- "what's economic survival really about in this bioregion?" Fat chance we'll inquire, not yet.

Who are the smart people among us in changing times? Let's consider those who live outdoors in the Portland area. It's pretty pleasant outside maybe 10 months a year if you're lucky, and it's not that hard to save enough money for an Amtrak ticket (or hopping a free freight) to head to kinder weather to the south where sleeping outside can continue comfortably. No rent! It also means not paying taxes which support more highway construction and the military's destruction of Iraq and Afghanistan. (Shall we do more than put an anti-war bumper sticker on our four-wheeled oil burner?) Being house-free and car-free also means not being a slave to debt and possessions. If you're too old to be a successful yuppie and your resumé's not so hot, what do you do? Teach? You survive.

No doubt you're passing off surviving outdoors, or even couch surfing and traveling as a lifestyle, as fantasy to seriously consider for one minute. But what about holy men and women of yore who wandered and met strangers every day, to exchange philosophy and meditate on nature's infinite beauty? To extend the begging bowl for alms while trusting in the Universe? Are such people and times just quaint anachronisms? Who do you know who has actually rejected material things and taken a vow of poverty, to seek adventure and enlightenment? Chances are, none. But what if more people did this? Granted, the U.S. is the opposite culture of that of the sadu's India. But wouldn't we learn to live more in the present, and consume in a dependent, helpless fashion less? Would not the consumer economy take a little hit? Wouldn't the empire builders, generals and corporate VPs of marketing lose out just a little?

Now that you're nodding your head, consider that you can do the next best thing: go car-free. Sell or give away anything you really don't need. Do it with someone, or a circle of people, who pledge to see each other through the not so distant future. If you cannot -- because you won't, for whatever reason -- can you really look in the mirror and say you are preparing for the post-petroleum world? Are you really giving Mother Earth a break if you cannot or will not go cold turkey from fossil fuel mischief-making? Clever monkeys that we are, some of us are so inventive and caring that we can still retain a car and whatever techno-gadgets and possessions, and really be promoting the future sustainable culture. Okay, but lifestyle change is nigh.

The vibrant Portland scene

Being realistic about lifestyle change underway in a hip, bike-friendly town such as Portland means comparing numbers of hard-core bicyclists -- such as those with bike carts -- with muscle trucks. The latter outnumber the former badly. Fortunately, the bicyclist-activist is far more likely to be a more vocal and community-engaged citizen, promoting change via personal example and by influencing policy. The muscle truck driver will simply run out of gas and will have to start biking, walking, riding horses, canoeing and sailing -- assuming there's successful gardening, gathering, fishing and hunting (in that order).

Portland's activist community is in gear to address the economic transformation underway. Rather than call it a "downturn" or "depression" we can refer to it in more positive terms. At a jam-packed meeting at the People's Food Coop last night, an organizing teach-in and transformational exercise took place. Established groups' representatives and unaffiliated citizens came together and broke down into many small groups to weigh the positives and negatives of our economic challenges. We exchanged ideas for fundamental change on the levels that matter most, from the individual to the neighborhood to the Portland population. Among the many break out grouplets I was glad to see a liberal scattering of peak oil activists, assuring that not too many illusions about energy "solutions" would distract from the real work of social and behavioral change.

Oil price-change's effect in the context of Humpty Dumpty's fall

We have seen oil prices plummet like never before in history. What does this mean for oil demand and the prospect of petrocollapse? My answer is "Not much." This is because demand destruction does not only come from high oil prices and tight supply. It comes also from economic collapse that in part was triggered by high oil prices. Keep in mind that the apparent price of oil does not include massive subsidies (both direct and hidden). Collapse of the economy and the passing of peak conventional oil extraction are already done -- begun, in motion. So why hold on to the car? Prices can subside but you may not have a job with which to buy fuel at any price. Humpty Dumpty's fall means we do not rebound in infinite number of times to perform some repeat of higher consumption, as economists are programmed to believe.

Conclusion

U.S. car exhaust contributes nearly one fifth of the nation's global warming gases, while transportation causes over one fourth of them. Noting the thickening chemical greenhouse, and the untold millions of car-related deaths each year on our planet (when crashes, exhaust-related diseases and sedentary factors are considered), an alien spaceship's observer might have to conclude, "They'll be driving around like idiots until they're stopped." Most likely. Except there are conscious humans everywhere who see another way of living; more in some spots than others. How's your street?

* * * * *

Car pollution fact you may not have known (Cars and Pollution EPA Fact Sheet OMS-5):

Catalytic converters, the part of car exhaust systems designed to break down nitrogen gases are actually forming nitrous oxide - 300 times more potent than carbon dioxide as a greenhouse gas. Nitrous oxide makes up about 7.2 percent of the gases cited in global warming, the USA EPA said in a study published spring 1998. Vehicles fitted with catalytic

converters produced nearly half of that nitrous oxide. Nitrous oxide also comes from nitrogen-based fertilizer and manure from farm animals.

Further Reading:

For more on car-free living and fighting road construction, see our archive website pages by putting in the Search engine: Auto-Free Times and Alliance for a Paving Moratorium.

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

culturechange.org/e-letter-carsolution.html

"The Despotism of the Image" by Dmitry Orlov:

culturechange.org