Overcoming Generational Weakness and Plastic Car-Culture / Toward a Re-Dedication to Conserving

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This essay asks what we Americans should expect from our leaders and ourselves when we are in a greater fix today, from climate distortion and petrocollapse, than in the 1940s when we had to go all-out to embrace Victory Gardens and conserve with a vengeance. Our resolve back then went far beyond encouraging the making and consuming of better cars! - JL

The idea of “progress” for succeeding generations of U.S. Americans and others comes increasingly though "conveniences" identified with science -- as our ecosystem, food security, civil liberties and financial well-being slip away. To speed us along we use more techno-products and procedures that are passed along, almost always unquestioned, through corporate marketing and our acceptance of agribusiness-derived fast food. When combined with the alleged “march of history" and other propaganda, the notion of our supposed “progress” and the more dangerous "progress" itself have been successfully foisted upon an unwary populace.

This trend has made people ever weaker as well as unskilled in critical ways.

Whether mainly from petroleum dependence or from other factors, a change in the species has occurred in modern societies that was unanticipated by the previous generation. While signs such as rising obesity rates and birth defects tell us a lot, complete evidence and consensus are not forthcoming as conclusions aired on the nightly TV news. But we can observe intuitively and use historical perspective.

Weakness is more visible in recent years, as more human specimens are “untough” compared to previous generations of people who lived or worked outside and "enjoyed" fewer manufactured products. With our rapidly changing habits in modern civilization we are more susceptible to disease such as cancer. We lack awareness about our true relationship with our surroundings. Our weakness is reinforced the more ignorant we are, as we are constantly manipulated to believe in the benefits of sophisticated, devious social control that is seldom acknowledged.

Skills are defined for the masses of citizens only by the employer class and their lackeys in government and the education sector. Technical knowledge increases while general knowledge and wisdom are devalued. Specialization for employment is increasingly antithetical to practical or traditional skills, in that there is almost no relevance in modern job-skills toward physical survival or building community.

The modern consumer is part of a sad lot: piggies as depicted in the film WALL*E (reviewed on Culture Change), or surplus humans consuming each other as in the film Soylent Green. The notion of modern humans as less able and more helpless than ever is objectionable to those who “accept the deal right off the shelf” (from the song I walk the Earth). These include revolutionaries too if they have completely bought into industrial culture and do not question social control that developed since the agricultural and industrial revolutions. One thing revolutionaries and reformers don't bring up: the more people there are the weaker we are.

Safety through "progress"

One way we are pacified and tamed is through the relentless promotion of the myth of safety. We are told and convinced

that today's world is safer from barbarity or wild beasts than in past centuries. No more bloodthirsty hordes who swoop down, rape, behead and burn. Or threat from wolves or lions. Or from highwaymen who no longer lurk because highway interchanges have fossil-fuel lighting and corporate outlets to comfort us. This way of life must be protected, we are told, so we pay through the nose for wars that are more about profit and oil dependence than safety.

We are also told we are safer by use of chemicals and sterilization and antibiotics. But these products' injudicious use makes us weaker. For example, resistance to bacteria is through contact with it, according to recent findings. Building our strength and resistance (e.g., through detoxification) is not a significant concern or accomplishment of the capitalist medical cult.

Trusting experts or worshiping credentials is a scam. It disempowers perfectly intelligent and capable people so that they stay in line and believe bullshit. Of course, much wonderful knowledge is sometimes only gotten through hard work and focus. The concept of "genius" can be little more than the ability to focus and concentrate. But, for whose benefit?

The environment - a problem outside of ourselves?

One danger from trusting experts and specialists is ironically at play most heavily and tragically in the environmental movement. I don't refer to the direct-action wing that brings out the best in many (but all too few) activists from all walks of life. I refer to the mainstream environmental movement that follows the ground rules of the polluting establishment and power structure. It's ironic that most of those claiming to professionally defend Mother Earth -- which they do do in a fashion and to an extent -- are locked into conventions and rules that sell out the planet. The big environmental groups have obviously not succeeded in their mission to improve the state of the environment. They decided to stay in business above all. For example, not one of the big groups dared join or endorse the Alliance for a Paving Moratorium during its 1990-2001 run, although they lamented urban sprawl (only Friends of the Earth U.S. seemed to support our APM). They do some good things, but the ecosystem is clearly failing. Hoping for a different result by doing the same thing is called insanity. Lesson: DIY, do it yourself, don't let anyone "save you" because they may be tied to Wall Street values (foundation funding, like political campaigns' support, comes from stock-market and other holdings). The environmental movement has paradoxically weakened us and the ecosystem by being a force for moderate reform instead of systemic change.

Questions that really question

One basic question the funded environmental movement and the education-establishment will not admit or teach us to ask: How can we condone the creation of this socioeconomic system –- the U.S.A. -- when it sprang entirely from invasion, racism, genocide, ecocide, and sexism? Such questions are avoided so that people do not question the legitimacy of the present society and its investments.

Another "unaskable" or "strange" question: What if no one is in control, in terms of understanding the whole system? The economy is so huge and diverse that it cannot be completely grasped in words and numbers. There's no one trained to have a commanding knowledge of key industries, consumer behavior, social influences, ecological factors, banking/fiscal/monetary workings, etc. This brings forward the disturbing question, "Does anybody understand fully what's going on?" A specialist can seldom be a generalist, and vice-versa.

When the populace is not looking any further than the struggle to survive or to divert itself (the word for "fun" in French is divertir), we don't ask questions that can lead to meaningful political movement and change. Today most of us are asking, "What's happening to my money?" rather than "Where is my money really?" A better question is, "Why is money the only measure and arbiter? What other power is there, and do I have some of it?"

Money is expected for doing just about anything and everything: activities spanning survival to enriching daily life and building a beautiful dream. In the absence of a real life with full potential, we settle for making our existence as comfortable as we can. Thus we do not obtain fundamental change in our surrounding physical and cultural environment. Ignore your dreams and you get waking nightmares.

A "solution"

As profoundly difficult as it may seem to solve these problems, we do have the guidance around us today that we need -- although it's like a frail elder or ghost that we are too busy to notice. We have evolved and survived almost entirely thanks to traditional ways of indigenous and "primitive" peoples. They happen to be the only real model of sustainability, but you won't hear that at your run-of-the-mill sustainability conference. An analogy for understanding the value of our past success -- before we literally loused it up with civilization -- is the track record of life itself: For the majority of the Earth's 4.5 billion years existence, since life began around 3.5 billion years ago, Mother Nature has been designing herself for efficiency, balance and harmony. We are her children. Speciation and diversity fit into niches for symbiotic relationships -- one grand family of life. To blow that off and knowingly cause extinctions is the act of a parasitic cancer that cannot see the benefit of preserving the host which is the web of life. So, nature's design as the bulk of Earth's successful, changing experience can be compared to tribal, traditional peoples' being the key to and the bulk of human experience.

How can we compare this to today's "reality" of what car we think we should buy to impress other people? If we can stipulate that at some point there are enough roads or too many roads, because we cannot afford to fix the vast, crumbling network, then we need a halt. This means using just the roads we have (for whatever purpose, which in future times without oil may be for other activities as much as transport). Therefore, at some point we would not fund or build any more roads. We need to think of cars in the same way: we have plenty of them, indeed too many. The 136-million car-population in the U.S. -- 251 million total motorized passenger vehicles -- is part of an ongoing and accelerating ecological disaster, and we have exported the car everywhere as best we could. Surely there are enough cars for us to use if we share them and limit them to essential use -- assuming we could keep using them if we deep sixed the oil industry by ceasing to buy all the products that refiners need to push on us. So, like the enough-roads policy, the policy on cars should be to make no more new ones; simply repair the ones we have as they do in Cuba. Here's what all this has to do with our generation's strength (or lack of it):

Toward a re-dedication to conserving, a la Victory Gardens

Through all the "infotainment," "news" and other distractions of modern life, we are occasionally reminded of all the recycling, rationing and other features of the successful effort in the U.S. during World War II to conserve and meet a national goal. The grassroots phenomenon of Victory Gardens is one of the best examples of making due through common sense. We need them now when our food supply is threatened by globalization, economic collapse and oil shortage ahead.

In World War II the U.S. citizenry was told, "If you ride alone you're riding with Hitler." Heeding that warning or accepting the sentiment was characteristic of a strong nation doing the rational thing at the time. Because,

(A) our great-grandparents were wiry-tough and were trained by their families for survival;
(B) Our grandparents were almost as tough as their parents;

(C) our parents less tough than theirs; and
(D) we are less able, less rounded (although more technological) than our parents; and
(E) our children are considerably weaker than our ancestors, if we only consider people's lack of skills and increased plasticization and radiation as reason to doubt our species' strengthening;

we can see what we have to overcome: to realize we must reject that the strongest thing we can do is hope for or call forth “clean, efficient cars made right here in America.” We can do far better. Just as we also are encouraged by Barack Obama to “Turn off the TV” for the sake of our children’s education, we need to turn off the killing CO2-spewing machine that eats farmland with road building: the car. This stance and cultural change will go a long way to removing the physical, moral, economic and political weakness we have allowed to be placed on us.

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"WALL*E – A push-button fable," by Albert Bates:

culturechange.org

I walk the Earth by Depaver Jan, a monaural one-track demo(MP3) from 2003 for the next Depaver Jan eco-song album

Car population statistics:

en.wikipedia.org/