

Making the Best of a Slow Apocalypse

Contributed by Joe Bageant
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[The main title of this essay as originally published is "The Sucker Bait Called Hope," but we felt its secondary title above reflects the main beauty of the piece which came out two months ago. -ed.]

We just concluded an election in which both parties talked about hope, one more so than the other. Hope, that murky, undefined belief that some unknown force, perhaps Jesus, or modern science, or some great political leader, or other -- as yet unknown force -- will reverse our national or personal condition... will deliver us from what every bit of evidence indicates is irreversible, if not politically, then ecologically: Decline and eventual collapse. There is quite a difference between hope and understanding the facts, then holding justified optimism. Hope is magical thinking, a sucker's game. Politicians the world 'round fully understand this.

Consequently, we go into a new year with millions of Americans still clinging to The Audacity of Hope. And we do so because we are victims of learned helplessness, learned from the cradle as it is rocked by the foot of the Capitalist consumer state. Sure we can hope for movement away from domination of the weak by the arrogant, away from ecocide and genocide toward a better world. What the hell, hope is one of the few free activities in this society. We don't even have to put down the remote and get off our asses to do it. In fact, its delivered through television.

But the fact is that when we encounter in-the-flesh examples of any merciful movement -- even through television -- we blanch and erect a wall of denial and excuses for our refusal to support that thing. Consider how the American public and the media (is there a difference?) responded to Rachel Corrie, who willingly died under the Israeli bulldozer protecting the home of a non-partisan Palestinian village doctor. The U.S. media all but ignored her. What few of the public knew of Cory's sacrifice were at first nonplussed, then deemed it a bizarre and stupid act. But even most Americans who did know joined the Larry Kings of the world in backhandedly mocking her. Moral conviction scares the hell out of us. Hope is effortless.

Thus, hope is still the order of the day. Obama's election will keep millions of American liberals and much of the world deliriously happy for a time to come. And to some degree at least, Obama's victory is a national rejection of the phony and expensive war on terror. Which is not a step forward, but rather a partial recovery from the immense and spectral folly of our needless warmaking -- recovery of one small bit of the vast ground we have lost ... or simply the next thing to do, now that we have tortured, terrified and leveled an entire people for the hell of it. Take your pick. But at some point we will have to cease thinking like children politically, grow up and personally accept responsibility, if we are to rescue our republic from ourselves.

Meanwhile, Obama takes charge of a bankrupt nation collapsing under late stage capitalism. "Not good, say Chief Thunderthud! White man manage to fuck up even under good presidents." Right chief. Indeed, there are many destructive forces far larger and more longstanding than a president and his powers. We can start with Congress. But our planetary ecocide probably trumps Congress.

Now if you will allow me a temporary lapse into theological seizure here: When it comes to those larger forces at play, none is larger and more enduring than the spirit, regardless of whether you call its presence God, the laws of physics, eternity, the Buddhist "great void," or the governing principle of the universe. And it is mature and ever greater truth-seeking that connects us with that force -- not hoping someone else, an Obama perhaps, is connected to it, and will exercise it toward the common good.

Common good

Most Americans, regardless of their political leanings or religion, would not recognize the common good if it bit 'em in the ass. We have no genuine concept of common good. We really don't. Toqueville observed that 170 years ago. He said that in America, no man owes another man anything. Nor is he owed by any other man. Where does that leave any

movement toward the common weal requiring the cooperative efforts of more than one man?

We all know the answer -- The Gubbymment. Which leaves the common good to greaseball politicians, banking and mortgage sharks, and a private cartel of behind-the-scenes hustlers called the Fed. Nevertheless, we have lived under the myth of rugged individualism so long we think we are in charge of our destiny -- which in our utterly monetized American system, means our financial fate. No matter that we let unseen elites own and manage our hard-earned dough over quail and cognac on the 45th floor. They're of the sort who know what's best. You can tell them by their arrogance and their good looking trophy wives. And by their big limos. Americans know the superior man when they see it.

Meanwhile, thanks to the doctrine of no man owing anything to any other, this doctrine of not being our brother's keeper in any important way, we are left with the social ethic of "every man for himself. Damned all social taxes and collective effort, I'll claw down my own share, and let the devil take the hindmost. Hell, maybe I'll even end up there on the 45th floor among the quail eaters with a blonde waiting in the sack. Land of boundless opportunity, right?"

Or on a more mundane level, as countless Americans have told me, "Why should I pay for someone else's health care? Let them buy their own, just like I did."

Consequently, we've not had universal health care for the common good. We have never enjoyed the benefit of universal higher education, because collectively we cannot agree that it is in the common good for all citizens to be equally free from ignorance. We pay the price of that at every turn ... in the lack of nuance in the national character, in the childlike and clichéd thinking of our electorate, in our satisfaction with a deluge of technological toys instead of meaningful work and leisure, or intellectual and spiritual substance. Nor is there assured food and shelter for the poorest among us, despite that it is in the common good that all children be raised in a secure environment ... because over generations that produces an ever nobler community and nation. "Each generation better than the last," as the saying goes.

Now, that is moreover a pretty good description of the American Dream, at least as it regards fairness and justice. And halting as it has been, we have made progress in fairness and justice -- civil rights and women's suffrage being two examples. And we could have achieved more, had we been fixed upon the most fundamental sense of what is just. We did that collectively as American citizens.

But conceiving of one's self as a citizen of our republic is the poorest way to do so, given that it acknowledges us more as property of the state than of the planet. Especially considering that we have a far larger responsibility to our common planetary home than to any armed and squabbling, ambitious nation state. That we managed to overcome such obvious inequities as slavery and the oppression of women is no great accomplishment at all. Just two small acknowledgments of justness. Yet we wallow in those small expressions of human and national decency as if the advancement of humanity were all but accomplished (one more civil rights documentary rammed down my throat and I'm gonna drive over to PBS offices in D.C. and shoot out their latte machine).

At any rate, once we made these advances, we felt free to haul off and kill as much of humanity as we deemed necessary to keep the oil flowing and our capitalist masters in a permanent state of dominance and caviar flatulence. We'd banned slavery and let women vote for the same scallywags as men. Lettin' the queers get hitched however, is one we're gonna have to think over for a while Hoss, because there's still political mileage in being agin' it!

Still, despite our sorry-assed condition as a citizenry, as individuals every one of us can recognize what is just and right. In fact, when it comes to the private, inward self, it is harder to avoid fairness than it is to justify unfairness, though we manage to. Regardless of our deformation by capitalism's relentlessness, and its accompanying materialistic mediocrity, we know there's such a thing as balance, such a thing as justness, and equity for all people, however much we refuse to acknowledge it. This, thanks to the "eternal scales" inside us all. And the fulcrum of these scales, this always-present, wordless inner preference, if not action, toward just balance, is, I believe, the spirit.

A common grave

Scientists may yet reduce all human behavior, thought and emotion to neurochemistry. That's their bag -- reducing the universe to impressive displays of tinker toydom so The Discovery Channel will have grist. But the most sublime expression of humankind is nevertheless more than the sum of its parts and must be called spiritual. I don't have any lofty language to explain that. I'm as "ignernt as the next feller," as my old man used to say. Either we can feel, or can learn to feel the common soul ... that essence coursing in all sentient things (and I for one, include trees, rivers, amoeba and the atmosphere in the count) and feel joy and unity in that, or we cannot. Either compassion enters our awareness and experiential reality through suffering and contemplation of the suffering of others ... or it does not. Either way, it would seem incumbent upon each of us to try to bring about a world in which compassion occurs for the maximum number of our fellow men. Given that we all share a common grave, compassionate action may well be the only human action of any value. Compassion for all living things on a living planet. In that resides the equilibrium of the world.

Not that we're ever gonna see equilibrium in the world. Or even come close. The ungilded truth is that the planet, at least as regards its sustenance of mankind and thousands of other species, is irredeemably fucked. Toast. And we cannot fix it, only slow down the inevitable, and hopefully settle out at some level which, though desolate by today's standards, we are still in a breathing and shitting state of existence.

To actually grasp catastrophe on this order of magnitude leaves us numb with shock. Or sends us in search of some better notion of our destiny than Mother Nature flushing humankind down the crapper. "What the hell, bitch? Don't you know we are made in the image of God!" "Which one?" Mother Nature cackles, then reaches for the lever. "But wait, wait! I'm gonna make better consumer choices from now on."

"Oh spare me!" moans the grand dame of the trees and waters.

"Consuming was the problem, dickhead."

Nonetheless, there will be a helluva lot more consuming, this time centered around consuming "consumer alternatives," such as burning of corn in vehicles and "Going green with Monsanto!" before our folly is complete. I see that now even our dogs can "eat green," though I doubt they like it much.

Most people reading this understand that we can never again be what we once were... a civilization occupying a relative material paradise through a danse macabre of unsustainable growth through resource depletion. So no matter how much we hear about political change, no politician can save us. Because no presidential candidate can run on the promise that "If we do everything just right, pull in our belts and sacrifice, we can at best be a Second World nation in fifty years, providing we don't mind the lack of oxygen and a few cancers here and there."

Still, there is choice available, even a superior choice: Accept the truth and act upon it. We can at the very least say no to scorched babies in Iraq. We can refuse to participate in a dead society gone shopping. That in itself can be called embracing the spirit. It won't accomplish shit, but it is nevertheless the right thing to do. Because it's the only just thing left to do. Too late, for sure, but better than remaining a dysfunctional moral cretin. My inner scales tell me so.

As long as we are cataloguing pointless acts of moral common sense, we may as well turn off PBS's Nova for a while. Realize the limits of technology and quit looking for more techno solutions to what technology itself hath wrought. All the

green energy sources and eating right cannot repair what has been irretrievably ruined. Species gluttony is nearly over and we've eaten the flesh of the earth and pissed upon its bones. Not because we are cruel by nature -- though a case might be made for stupidity -- but because we took the existence of individual consciousness to mean that each of us is some unique center of the world, acquisitive and deserving of all things. One brand of this collective hallucination, although there are others, is called American exceptionalism. And we can get away with that game as long as the oil and the entertainment last. Which looks to be about another half hour.

A simple life

You might be thinking: If those are the facts and there's really little I can do, why not just indulge myself and enjoy the life I have left? Sit and order a pizza? Well, those are the facts. And most people choose to do just that. So do I sometimes. Fortunately or unfortunately, my sense of indulgence is so repulsive it scares even me back onto the path.

Living more simply is a prerequisite to right action -- but it's no solution at all. Making the world a slightly less bad place than before is fine, but no solution. The problem is too far out of hand now. "Solutions," are over too. I'm sure by now, assuming you got this far, you're thinking, Bageant, you're a negative, gin-addled old toad. So be it.

But you might also ask, "Now that you've eliminated all hope in this screed, what does one do about all this? I'm sure that what you're gonna' suggest will be unpleasant as hell, and if it involves enemas or rubber gags and leather straps, I ain't gonna play." But to humor you, I'll ask, "Do I renounce materialism or what?"

My own wife asks me this shit, so I think that's a fair question. And a fair answer is: "I don't know." But I do know what has worked for me. And since we are all arguably of the same species (I have my doubts about Adam Sandler fans and Dick Cheney) obviously at the very least, consumer renunciation is called for, strivance for a genuinely simple and essential life. Which is completely impossible in this country. But we can and should try.

In the big picture though, consumerism was never the problem. Capitalism was. And it still is. Consumerism is merely the way workers are compensated for the general shittiness of their lives. It seems to have worked. Thus, my urge to get on the public address system at the NASCAR Talladega run and scream: "You fat fuckers don't need another corndog or that fifteenth beer that has made your belly so big you haven't seen your dick in ten years."

But as historian Eugene McCarrher points out, simply telling people that they're too consumeristic, too materialistic, doesn't work. It doesn't work because it gives people the impression that the material and the spiritual are antithetical. Yet the natural material world is the only sacramental thing that exists (minus the corndogs).

Commodity fetishism

Our relationship with the physical/material world is not only holistic and ecologically interwoven... it is also the source of our spiritual essence. Which is why monolithic production, monetization, and commodity fetishism destroy our essence. We must think through that. We must look around us at its proof, and learn it for ourselves. If you don't pick up on that, you're screwed. And if you do you pick up on it, you get to fester on real questions. Such as, "How do I accept responsibility for my life?" (which I never the hell wanted in the first place...) We can ask, "How do I leave the world a little better than I found it? And the answer is, who the hell cares? Making the world a slightly less bad place than before is fine... but it's no solution. The problem is too out of hand now for that to be any kind of solution. But we should try, because we have a lot of time on our hands yet.

We can also ask ourselves: are my living actions more contributory, more effective than, say, drinking a can of Drano? Don't laugh. If we really think that through, we will be surprised how hard that is to do. Not fuck things up worse, I mean. Life really ain't sacred in and of itself. You get born, you eat, breathe and shit, and you fuck things up. You start out with a negative balance in the ole karmic account. Then you start doing serious payback without even an inkling of the total amount due. No wonder babies come into the world with a squall of protest. Theologians tell me that this is called redemption, and that it gives life meaning. Maybe so, but it sure as hell makes things harder.

Perhaps we should all "dialogue on this" a bit? Nope. This thing we are facing, this thing we must do, is not just another topic for more "dialogue." And besides, this is a cyber monologue, and one of the nice things about the Internet is that you can't be interrupted while you're offending other people's sensibilities. In any case, regardless of who's doing the dialoging, Earth First, the Dalai Lama or the ghost of Reinhold Niebuhr, let's not kid ourselves that if we only yak some more, the world and mankind will somehow heal themselves. It's easy for the wealthy of the earth such as you and I (especially if one has an Internet connection) to want to believe that. After all, we had breakfast this morning and we not only have clean potable water to drink -- which 2.2 billion people do not -- but also shit in the stuff. The real solution -- not to the problem, which is unsolvable in the long haul, but to balancing those eternal scales inside ourselves -- begins with a more contemplative and reflective life, and the care of the soul. Both of which are necessarily thwarted by the wasteful daily busyness of our materialism and technology. Jesus did not text message his truth, and the Buddha never had a single friend on Facebook. Yet we hear their truth across millennia. They simply practiced compassion. Only by eliminating suffering among sentient beings, do we create the spiritual soil in which peace can flourish. That takes conviction. The real stuff. It pisses me off that the Christian fundamentalists of my childhood were right about one thing -- the value of conviction -- but that's the way it is.

And as long as we are still breathing and passing water, choice remains available, even superior choice: Accepting the truth and acting upon it. Thankfully, we can do individual positive action. It starts with getting in touch with higher intelligence: Our own. After that, it's soul work.

We can, at the very least, deliver our bodies to the halls of power and say: "No more scorched babies in Iraq!" We can refuse to participate in a dead society gone shopping. We can remember and contemplate the example of Rachel Cory. Or even follow that dogged neocon mantra of "taking personal responsibility," but doing it for real. All of which can be considered voting for the spirit.

It will take an entire lifetime of commitment, and the world will continue to crumble around us even as we work. There will be not one ounce of public glory or reward during our lifetimes, not if we are doing it right. And if we turn a buck on it, we can be assured that we are playing the same game as this earth's wrecking crew. Which is called irony, I guess.

Yet the reward lies right there before us. Knowing and observing the spirit in all things... even above life itself. It is the first fearful step... the first stone on the path to liberation. Anyway, that's my take on things.

Namaste.

Get me a beer while you're up.

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See the author's website where he has more writings:

joebageant.com

A philosopher for our time, Joe Bageant's reaction to our request to run his essay was an honor:

"That's one goddamned good site for anyone ready to face the facts affecting every person on the planet. A good site to start understanding our true planetary situation, and a good site for keeping up with ongoing events affecting the fate of us all. It makes me happy as hell to see the truth becoming ever more available and accessible, because we are fast approaching that day when everybody will be forced to deal with it. And to do that, they will need the on the ground truth you provide. - In art and labor, joe"

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