Daydreaming Our Way to Shipwreck

Contributed by Dave Leith
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We are like passengers on a great ocean liner utterly lost in the middle of a sea unknown -- but we don't quite recognize it yet. Indeed, over time our view across this watery expanse has become increasingly dimmed and distorted by a constant flow of "busyness" and "distractions."

Our virtually unassailable crew and leaders from "first class" suggest the best way to maintain a preferably lopsided if not stable functioning of our ship requires our days to be filled with long periods of "productive" activity followed by shorter periods of idle amusement. So we continue to float amid the salt and water, riding the unpredictable current with a certain sense of resigned self-assurance that we'll find our way soon enough, apparently oblivious to the ominous confluence of dangers that insidiously glimmer against a darkened horizon.

What makes this complacency about our predicament even more disturbing for a small fraction of us is that we are as well the chief navigator for many of the smaller ships around the world that are also currently at sea. And yet despite these troubling signals seen flickering forebodingly off in the distance by anyone who pays attention and displays any semblance of foresight, our crew and some of their friends in first class don't seem too worried. Perhaps it's because they have enough good food and accommodations to last themselves for quite some time -- and besides, as they constantly propagandize to the rest of us, mainly through announcements over their megaphones that seem to be everywhere, "it's just a temporary glitch in our navigational equipment, and while the seas can periodically offer a rough ride, it's nothing we haven't conquered before. Just stay busy maintaining the basic condition of the ship and everything will be fine. We'll be back to shore before you know it, and on to new and rewarding adventures."

Not surprisingly such reassurances are readily accepted by the great majority of passengers. Indeed most shipmates are too busy earning their keep and pacified by cute but relatively inane modes of self-gratification to effectively challenge the course and fanciful expectations set forth by the crew. And besides, the ocean liner itself is a pretty indestructible-looking and magnificent sight to behold, and virtually all previous voyages under our long-time mariner system have ultimately worked out pretty well for most. Nevertheless, there's no denying that most voyages, including this one, have been much easier on the crew and passengers in first class, In fact, one small section of the ship is very fancy, a lot of bells and whistles, top-of-the line cabins, meals, cleaning services, and entertainment. The rest of the ship, though quite imposing by sheer size alone, is actually pretty prosaic; reasonably comfortable for most, yet for a portion in the "third class" section there aren't even enough cots to sleep on, and the food has gotten pretty pedestrian, unhealthy, and even sparse in one area at the south end of the ship.

[Two Years Hence] During its preparations for this voyage the crew had decided to commission one of those nuclear-powered ships where refueling needs are much less frequent, and so the trip was supposed to be a real adventure -- a full six-month excursion -- but it has in fact now dragged on for what we think is a few years, although nobody seems to know for sure anymore. And the crew has still not been able to fix the navigational system, but they nevertheless remain inexplicably confident that they've now set the right course.

Meanwhile, over the past year or so, things have gotten a bit dicey, particularly for those passengers in second and third class. Remember those warning signals alluded to just a couple of years back? Well, the symptoms from such threats are starting to become more pronounced, and it's not a pretty sight for many. First, to conserve fuel we've had to shut down the ships electricity use for second and third class passengers to only two hours a day. Second, some of the second class and most of the third class have had to survive on strict food and water rations. Third, we've had a baby boom on the ship, particularly from within the third class section, which has resulted in overcrowding and smaller rations. Fourth, even though the crew and leaders from first class have lied to us and displayed utter hubris and incompetence in their handling of this predicament, the rest of us aren't even aloud to truly engage them in their decision-making and are instead told to get our information from their monopoly of daily megaphone announcements.

Fifth, we've suffered through a significant increase in storms, including narrowly missing a tidal wave, and rumor has it a crew member was overheard saying he's pretty sure we just missed hitting a small island that used to be above sea level,

which of course sent a chill down the spines of those on board with loved ones living along the coast back home. Sixth, leaks began to appear along the base of the ship starting about six months ago. The leaks have now increased in frequency to the point where a new one seems to appear about every two weeks, and it's become harder and harder to fix them because it's now impossible to get the water out that has collected over time. Interestingly an anonymous source, thought to be one of the ship's sixteen engineers, suggested that the "leak problem" is the result of a structural defect that's been downplayed by the crew and the ship's owners for years.

Seventh, a "paper money system" has been used on the ship for a long time. This paper money is paid out primarily by the crew and first class for jobs done by passengers on the ship, and this allows passengers to make selections or purchases from a menu of "special privileges." The crew charges passengers a tax on their labor to maintain the common areas on the ship. None of us ever thought much about where this paper money came from as long as we earned enough of it from our labor to afford some of our favorite "things" and "activities." Unfortunately however, a select group of elite members from first class were years ago given the authority by our crew to create this paper money "out of thin air", charge interest on this money that's not really theirs, and collect that interest from our labor tax, as well as from "loans" given out to passengers (with money virtually all of which is not really theirs). In effect therefore, most of the passengers have been surreptitiously robbed by this elite group over many years. Ultimately, more and more of our labor tax is going to service our collective debt "owed" to this group, and as a result maintenance of the ship's common areas and investment in new and sustainable infrastructure projects have become neglected to the point where passenger safety and ship durability are increasingly threatened.

Adding insult to injury, as it turns out this elite group has a penchant for poker, and as such it was recently discovered that they have gambled away our entire labor tax collected over the past three years. Furthermore, nobody seems to trust the lending system anymore, so these elites are now desperately creating more and more paper money to prevent the system from collapsing, which simply put further erodes the "real" value of our money by increasing the money supply. Thus, most passengers are now lucky if they can afford one special privilege a month, a pleasure they used to be able to indulge in two to three times per week.

Eighth, about three months ago our supplies of food, water, and "enriched uranium" (the fuel source that propels the ship) were even in worse shape than they are today. Apparently this resource shortage was serious enough that when we happened upon an off-course and much more modest-looking ship commissioned by a foreign land known for its high concentration of uranium, our crew immediately set course to intervene. Word has it from an inside source that this ship was so intimidated by our ocean liner's high-powered artillery that they ultimately accepted a paltry sum for allowing us to board their ship and confiscate half of their uranium and half of their food and drinking water. Most of us didn't feel a need to complain about what seemed to be a patently immoral act because our own well-being was enhanced by the encounter, and indeed many of our jobs depended on maintaining the ship's massive artillery.

Finally, most of second and almost all of third class passengers have become increasingly angry. The great majority used to have more interesting jobs that provided a sense of accomplishment, such as painting beautiful designs on the decks and murals, as well as throughout the living quarters -- but with supplies now exhausted they're left with mainly just cleaning responsibilities, if they even have a job at all. In addition, most passengers used to have an increasing "standard of living," but now even their basic privileges (e.g., taking showers, eating enough food) and modest pleasures (e.g., watching/listening to movies/music on DVD) have been greatly curtailed as a result of resource shortages. And moreover, what seems to provoke the most rage is that at the same time these second and third class passengers have significant austerity measures imposed on them, they see the crew and much of the first class engaged in sophisticated and very prestigious planning activities, while also still eating five star meals, living in posh cabins, and throwing lavish parties.

I'm now writing in my journal after what is believed to be over 1,000 days at sea, and what is currently transpiring on this ship is indeed frightening. There is still no indication that we are anywhere close to land. Our fuel source is so depleted now that the entire second and third class ship population only gets two hours per week of electricity, with the rest going towards propelling the ship in a direction we can only hope is correct (the crew and first class have not been rationed). Many are left dirty, hungry, and feeling destitute as a result. Our food and water supply is now so low that all the passengers except the crew and first class are provided very small rations: second class just enough to allow them to function well enough to get the manual labor done on the ship; third class just enough to try and keep them alive. Of course, a twenty percent increase in the ship population since we set sail has further hastened our depletion of

resources, and an increased frequency and ferocity of storms has left a high number of passengers wet and cold for extended periods. A subset of passengers has formed radical clans that have recently carried out a series of attacks on the “paper money creators” and the megaphone system. In addition, the ship in which we had earlier confiscated much of their fuel and supplies has apparently been following us, and just the other day we stopped to see how they were holding up and discovered that over half their population had perished. Our crew told them, “we are sorry”, and then we just went on our way. Then there’s the matter of the leaks in the base of the ship, which have now gotten so bad that our repairs seem to no longer have any positive effects whatsoever. As a result, the ship has now become extremely heavy, uses much more fuel, and is increasingly prone to sinking. All told now, we have lost close to five percent of the ship population due to various infectious diseases, pneumonia, drowning after falling overboard during storms, starvation, and violent class and resource wars. And while our very survival is still unclear, it is now unequivocal that we are in the process of losing civilization as we have known it, with still no end in sight.

Early the next morning I find myself sitting in a barren corner of the ship, soaking up a rare moment of relaxation as the sun thankfully warms and soothes my damp and frazzled soul. I sense an alternate consciousness descending upon me as I ponder the reasons for how and why this chaos and burgeoning catastrophe came about. I ask myself a number of questions, and try to give honest answers.

Was the speed and fury of these turn of events understandably unexpected? Were we overcome by a wave of natural forces out of our control? Were we truly ignorant of the risks looking forward? I pause a moment... then I answer emphatically... NO, these are clearly not sufficient explanations for what has happened...
Continuing to probe, I ask myself another series of questions: Were we simply narcissistic? Were we just plain oblivious? Were we wallowing in an age of cravenness? Did we sense the gravity of the situation and in response recoil into a state of denial? Were we lacking compassion for other living things outside of our own back yard? Did we deliberately disconnect ourselves from nature? Were we as a society simply unable to effectively react to pending hardship until it’s too late? Were we addicted to institutions whose very nature nurtured this budding calamity? Was our political and economic hierarchy literally driving us to destruction out of their own love of power and greed? After much thought and reflection, I’m forced to admit that yes, it was indeed a particularly pernicious combination of all of the above that surely must have led us to this day of despair and uncertainty.

At that very moment everything seemed to crystallize. I now realized that for quite some time there were simply not enough of us who either understood or cared to understand the full ramifications of the following realities: That our nonrenewable energy resources are finite; that we are approaching peak production and subsequent depletion of such resources, and that the consequences (e.g., food shortages) of not being adequately prepared to effectively transition to alternatives is potentially catastrophic. That some of our most precious natural resources (e.g., water) are subject to misuse and regional depletion, causing untold human misery. That man is causing the planet to warm, and is principally responsible for the dire environmental consequences that will result. That exponential growth in people and in the productive economy is mathematically unsustainable, and will ultimately create social chaos and ecological collapse. That the increasing gap between the haves and have nots is politically unviable and morally unconscionable. That mass propaganda delivered by a small fraction of wealthy owners over the public airwaves is not in the people’s interest. That paying interest to private bankers on money that isn’t really theirs is an uncivilized and mass swindle of the people. That our reliance on military might is fiscally irresponsible and morally unacceptable. And finally, that our political system is not living up to a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, but is in actuality an endangered civilization of the crew, by the first class, and for the rich and powerful.

Sitting silent and motionless in my lonely corner of the ship, I suddenly notice the bright sun has now given way to a menacing array of storm clouds as a gust of frigid mist scurries across the deck. A gnawing chill once again invades my flesh, and then an epiphany strikes me -- our only hope to try and avoid an utter shipwreck is for me and many other shipmates to arouse enough of our fellow passengers to challenge the decision-making of the crew and first class. We must have the courage to force accountability... to change the tide of fate. Let us hope that enough of us can be awoken from our mass daydream in time.

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