Waking Up in a Former Empire at the End of the Industrial Age

Contributed by Suzanne Duarte
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Or: Is It "Mean" to Tell Someone Their House is on Fire?

You can never awaken using the same system that put you to sleep in the first place. - Gurdjieff

Dearest Ones of Future Generations,

I thought you might find it interesting to hear what I'm observing of those people I know about who are just waking up to what the state of the planet is.

Last month saw Earth Day, an international day of observance for the Earth. For nearly 40 years, it has been a day when environmentalists have had a chance to provide a reckoning of the damage that industrial civilization has been inflicting on the natural world. It is usually a time when print media make some obligatory gesture of recognition that humans live on a planet that we depend upon and that needs our attention. This year the statements were a little more urgent than usual, especially about climate change, which is increasingly referred to as "climate emergency."

The reason that we are in a climate emergency -- in fact, a biological holocaust, as it was identified over 20 yrs ago -- is that the dominant Western, globalized culture has been in a "cultural trance," drunk on oil, living in a delusional bubble for about 60 years. Now, the question is, is it unkind or rude or unskillful to try to wake people up from their cultural trance and point out that we are endangering the future of our species, and many others, to remain asleep? Is it "mean" to wake somebody up to tell them that their house is on fire? A lot of people seem to think so. I've lost friends by trying to wake them up. Waking up at this time of the Great Turning from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining way of life is painful. Many people still don't want to know, don't want to think, because it would entail facing painful truths and making hard choices. They can stand to think about it only briefly on one day out of the year. This is the reason I write letters to the future.

I feel that beings of the future need and deserve an explanation for the destruction caused by my generation. And I can be more straightforward with you than with my contemporaries, for the aforementioned reasons. In the last resort, perhaps I am writing only to my future incarnations to remind them of what this lifetime was like, remind them of the dismay, frustration and pain of not being able to wake people up so that the future might be more livable.

In any case, this missive is about what I observe to be the difficult stages of waking up at this time of crisis and danger. There is complex inner terrain to traverse before we can identify the opportunities and the adventure that await us if we have the courage to wake up and make the Great Turning. The challenge is that the Great Turning requires a psychological transformation from childlike dependence on external authorities and their outworn belief systems, to a mature, individuated, authentic sense of responsibility for oneself and one's effects on the world. This is a major transformation, much more than is normally implied when we, at this time, speak of 'growing up.'

It seems that the hardest part of waking up at this time is facing the fact that it is too late to avoid the pain, suffering and loss that could have been forestalled, had humans collectively heeded the warnings. The warnings were and are rational and scientifically based. The denial of the warnings was and is irrational, based on false beliefs. Pointing out that the denial was collective and irrational causes some people to point the 'shame and blame' finger at those who make this

point. Instead of allowing themselves to evaluate the truth of the statement, they whine, 'You're shaming and blaming us. That's not healing. You're being apocalyptic. We don't want to hear it, and it's your fault for not giving us the message of hope that we need.' This is a common shoot-the-messenger response, in which people who don't like the message blame, or 'shoot,' the messenger.

The message of 'hope' that is demanded is the hope that we don't have to take responsibility for ourselves and our world by changing how we live, and what we preoccupy ourselves with. The hope that many people want is very conditional. They can only take hope if they are reassured that things will continue as they have been during these very extraordinary last few decades.

The cultural trance prevents people from recognizing that the reality of living on Earth is unconditional. Our survival depends upon facing the reality of the larger living system we depend upon, and that larger living system doesn't make deals. We can't bargain with it. We live within its jurisdiction. The Earth has been very patient. It has put up with a lot of abuse, but the biological life of living systems is quite fragile, very vulnerable to damage by machines. Living systems have limits and tipping points beyond which breakdown and/or evolution can occur. The limits to which we can push living systems have been in view for decades. Because the limits were ignored, we are now seeing and experiencing the tipping point stage, and systemic chaos can therefore be expected.

The reality is that, not only do we have to change the way we live, but we need to recognize our part in creating this necessity. In order to survive we need to own this responsibility and grow up, so that we don't repeat our mistakes again. That this message is taken as an insult is an ego-based default response, which is irrational and childish. This is the crux of the reason that humanity needs to grow up. Growing up resets these immature default settings. Growing up means accepting responsibility, taking the blame upon oneself, acknowledging one's blind spots, and one's dysfunctional social conditioning. Growing up means getting honest and feeling remorse for the consequences of one's childishness and self-deception.

This is the point where we are right now, collectively. The minority of visionary Cassandras is turning out to be correct. But that is small comfort since they/we are still facing the wrath – and the consequences – of the majority who rejected foresight, and want to blame somebody, scapegoat somebody. The stages of grief have to be worked through in the process of waking up: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. Coming out of denial, the next reaction for most people is anger.

But I hope you of future generations can have some sympathy and compassion for those who are just waking up, because the discrepancy between the dream they are coming out of and the reality they must face is quite enormous. Some people talk about how "we need a new story," a new cosmology, and this is true as far as it goes. But there are two facts that belie the simplicity of that statement. One is that the new story is still in gestation and isn't yet a 'live birth.' The other is that the gap between the cultural trance of the old story and the unfolding reality of the world has never – in the history of our species – been so wide as it has become in Western civilization. The American Dream, in particular, has been so disconnected from the reality of the Earth that waking up from it is truly a 'rude awakening,' as we say, that can seem traumatic. Although waking up may be most difficult for Americans, that dream has also entranced much of the rest of the world.

However, since I am an American, I can identify with the difficulty of waking up from the American Dream. I know from experience that it entails working through layers and layers of collective delusion: the sense of entitlement and security of being a citizen within the "greatest country the world has ever known"; the sense that our country is superior and can do no wrong, and that it is 'exceptional' and will not collapse like other civilizations and empires; the sense that America is entitled to take what it wants from the rest of the world – by force if necessary; the sense that living in the United States is an unsurpassable blessing for which we should be grateful; the sense that 'we' (Americans) are the best people; and the sense that loyalty to our country demands that we turn a blind eye to its wrongdoings and faults. These are the delusions of the citizens of empire, carried over from ancient tribalistic habitual patterns.

Just to wake up to the injustices, lies, and crimes of our empire, and to realize that our arrogant assumptions of entitlement and superiority are baseless, takes a lot of courage; for to face these things means we must step out of the herd, and leave the herd mentality of the majority behind. This is a necessary part of growing up.

But once we've woken up to the injustices of our empire, the next step in growing up and facing reality is the realization that our empire is faltering and failing; in fact, it is disintegrating. At this stage one peeks over the edge of the cloud or the cliff and begins to comprehend how far it is to the ground – how far we have to fall. This is where we truly begin to realize that we are living in a former empire at the end of the industrial age, and that 'progress' as we've known it is over. Then we begin to comprehend that the glories of the way of life we've taken for granted – the glamour, ease and convenience of the industrial age – can never, ever be repeated, because our civilization has stripped the Earth of the resources that are accessible through the use of fossil fuels, and fossil fuels are going away. As Richard Heinberg has detailed for us, we have reached "Peak Everything" and after the peak, the only way is down.

This "Long Descent" or "Long Emergency" – as John Michael Greer and James Howard Kunstler, respectively, have described it – is the future that the majority of citizens of former empires have not yet been able to face. I don't mean just Americans. I live in another former empire, the Netherlands. Here is what I recently observed of the masses in this overcrowded country.

Queens Day, April 30, 2009

With the sun shining and temperatures in the low 60s, boats and barges full of people wearing bright orange, often standing up shoulder-to-shoulder, float by on the canal, blaring loud music. The Dutch make a lot of noise celebrating their Dutchness on this national holiday, celebrating the chance to take a day off in the sunshine after a long, dark winter.

This is the way the Dutch have 'fun': they crowd together in the streets and on barges and boats, and make a lot of noise. They wear their national color, orange, to show their nationalistic solidarity. They play popular music at high volume and wave their arms in the air to express themselves. They get drunk and do crazy things. Today a driver drove his car into a crowd of people, and four people died. My Dutch husband said it was simply 'mania,' a mania he reported seeing on the streets yesterday as people prepared to 'celebrate.' The Dutch are prone to do crazy things when they have an excuse to relax their habitual stiffness.

I catch myself looking at these people unkindly. I am not only detached, but arrogantly so. Yet I immediately recognize that my arrogance is a cover for the sadness I feel, knowing that the loud display of color and sound is a cover for a psychological condition, of which the Dutch are in stubborn denial. I think about all the petroleum that is being wasted to power these people around and around the canals of the city, trying so hard to have a good time. What is behind this frivolity? Why do people waste time, energy and resources on such frivolity, if it isn't an avoidance mechanism – an avoidance of the truth? Do they know at some level that they live in a former empire at the end of the industrial age? Is this the subconscious awareness, the anxiety that is fueling their manic 'fun'?

I am reminded of the drunken parties of the Nazi elites, portrayed in many films, just before the fall of Berlin and Hitler's suicide, which marked the end of World War II. This kind of frivolous abandon – also evoked by the image of the mad emperor Nero fiddling while Rome burned – seems to be a compensatory measure of resistance to facing a reality that cannot be faced. The drunken parties precede suicide.

Not far from the Dutch geographically or politically is another former empire, Britain. Both the UK and the Netherlands have supported the American empire in its military adventures to control the supply of oil. But the Brits seem to be expressing their anxiety slightly less frivolously – by attacking each other for policies that are meant to maintain the status quo and the illusion that economic recovery is possible. (The British are much better at publicly arguing with each other than the Dutch are.) However, things seem to be in a more advanced stage of economic and social breakdown in the UK than in Holland, and grassroots movements – notably Transition initiatives – are far more robust in the UK than in Holland. In fact, they started there. I attribute the Transition movement's birth in the UK to the deeper spiritual connection with the natural world that people traditionally have had in the British Isles, and also a deeper understanding of the dark side of industrialism. After all, the industrial revolution started in England, which provoked several opposition

movements – the Romantic poets, the Arts and Crafts movement, and the Luddite protests against machines, not to mention many novels. It's almost as though something in the British cultural psyche has been waiting and preparing for the end of the industrial age since it began.

Waking up to living in a former empire at the end of the industrial age brings gravitas to one's outlook, as Kurt Cobb suggests in Does understanding complexity beget a tragic view of life? One does not and cannot celebrate as the Dutch were celebrating outside my window. That kind of frivolous abandon is no longer possible once one has worked through the cultural trance, come down to Earth, and accepted responsibility. Then celebration takes on a decidedly more sober, mindful, even reverential tone.

But, dear ones of the future, few people in this former empire, Holland, or in America (which will soon be globally recognized as a former empire) have acquired the gravitas – the groundedness in reality – to prepare for the end of cheap oil, or any of the other circumstances that will radically change our supposedly 'non-negotiable' way of life.

So, if you can, try to see the wastefulness and triviality that are so prevalent at this time as the desperation of an immature culture, which is resisting the necessity of a rite of passage that only those capable of growing up are likely to survive. The ones who do survive are likely to be your ancestors. They will probably be the ones who woke up in time and prepared for the end of the industrial age and climate change.

With love and compassion for all future beings,

Suzanne

Suzanne Duarte has been teaching Buddhadharma, Deep Ecology, and Ecopsychology for over 30 years, including Peak Oil since 2005. Later this year she will launch her new website, Dharmagaians.org and its blog. This essay will be the kind of thing that will appear on her Dharmagaians blog.