# The Whole Human Being: a "new" and savvy citizen for our times

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Note: Busy long-time readers of Culture Change may wish to skip the more analytical first fifteen paragraphs and get down to the passion and taking-action second part. - JL

In this time of mounting threat to our species and the entire biosphere, our weakness seems to come down to individualism and materialism. Are such modern traits, heretofore thought by most to be strengths, the Achilles heel of a dying dominant culture? If so, what do we do about this?

The trouble is that our manufactured, packaged possessions - especially those requiring power - are warming the globe and poisoning the environment. Many a U.S. home has even more televisions than people, and the U.S. has reached and surpassed the point of having more working cars than drivers.

Despite global warming's being commonly known, the trend is for even more stuff per capita than before knowledge of climate change and peak oil hit public awareness. Then there is rising population, not part of our national discussion - except that there is no celebration planned for the 300 millionth U.S. resident to come along this autumn.

Centering one's life around unlimited material things buys into a big lie: "Survive, get by, and be happy if we have the right objects and goods." Whether people are getting to suspect this corporate con game to get us to consume, discontent and busyness are on the rise. But until there's another model, materialistic living seems like the ticket for most of us.

Love? It helps, but what passes for love is increasingly based on ephemeral hormones and the narrow economics of the nuclear family. Therefore, there's not all that much love in the materialist's and individualist's life when it's so preoccupied with making money ("survival").

Our idea of what is necessary to survive has broadened materially and technologically. So not only is happiness no longer achieved by pursuing selfishness as individuals and materialists, our very survival is in question if we keep going with today's extreme forms of individualism and materialism.

How are we obtaining our stuff and achieving what's supposed to be material security? We trade our freedom for it. The basic freedom to do as we each believe we should, given natural inclinations, is denied before we are old enough to think, as we are pushed into schools and the job market. Millions of citizens in the U.S. seem to think freedom means waving the flag and being able to buy stuff, while not facing the possibility that real freedoms atrophy from neglect.

If that's one's permissive viewpoint, that's an unexamined life. It's also unsustainable and obsolete. What's sustainable is what gets us through centuries and millennia: using renewable materials and sharing the Earth in a cooperative culture.

Individualism makes us stronger, up to a point. An example is housing that provides one's own plot of land. A good move, although possibly isolating. However, the cumulative effect is urban sprawl. Ditto for materialism: some material things are truly crucial or add to an artistic, healthy existence. But a lot material pursuit becomes unhealthful. Consumer goods and conveniences, once luxuries, still make people feel wealthy. Only a few people in this dominant culture evidently feel richer by increasing their knowledge, wisdom and creativity.

We've fallen out of balance, if we ever had it in Western Civilization. Yet, people shout, "I'd rather not be a peasant, thank you," and relish material progress and the freedom to "work anywhere." But why does it have to be either/or? Anyway, peasantry is part of Western Civilization too, even though petroleum has reduced human and animal labor. Why not imagine a culture in balance with nature that does not make us machines or beasts of burden? Such an imagined culture may be the only viable model after petrocollapse.

If you were to try to take away someone's car, TV and telephone, he or she would likely react violently as if their food and water were being taken away. That's how far we have to go to undo our dependence on material things such as petroleum. The goodies of our slavery under industrial society are coveted strongly and desperately, as made clear by Vice President Cheney's defiant "The American way of life is not negotiable." However, it was negotiable for his faction to unilaterally dismantle Constitutional freedoms that supposedly had to be traded for security.

For a mainstream, modern person inclined to do what he or she is told - instead of risking not fitting in so that one can live one's own life - there is little questioning of the pursuit of material wealth. Likewise, the buttressing of society's

ownership patterns, to safeguard the institution of greed, is suffered and tolerated because we find it easier not to fight back. Eventually, people are pushed into a corner. In the 1980s it became clear to formerly naïve Americans that the trickle-down economics of the rich getting richer was a bogus solution to distributing wealth. Now our eyes widen at worsening crony-capitalism and the increasingly brazen taking of our rights and of ever greater numbers of innocent lives, as power is consolidated and the planet melts.

By 2006, there is no excuse for continuing to play innocent about U.S. society and its global role: the "mistakes" of trusting Reaganism and capitalism, and allowing a replay of Vietnam (Iraq), ought to be hammering in our minds along with awareness that megapolluters just will not stop. Volunteer efforts by industry to cut pollution and treat workers more fairly and safely is like asking a wolf gorging on a moose to save a little bit for the hungry foxes. "Eh? Share? Are you a communist? You're lucky you're allowed to be here and be able to speak openly. That's the beauty of our democracy - just try protesting in other countries. So be patient and vote. Never mind that the rich own the vote."

When people don't question materialism - admittedly the "only game in town" - they may imagine that if they are not especially greedy, then they are virtuous and not part of the problems afflicting the world. After all, they have simple albeit imagined needs: they merely want "only" one car, one computer, one college degree, one spouse, one television, one of these and one of those. But such a lifestyle and value-system is a deeper problem than the existence of creatures such as Bill Gates, Saddam Hussein, Donald Trump, corrupt politicians, and other twisted greedballs. This is because the multiplying effect of modest polluters who believe common manufactured goods are alright for the Earth is far greater than all the rich folks' aggregated excesses. And, out of the masses of consumers arise the next Gates, Trump, Bushes, et al. The beast has a body, not just heads.

If we can expunge the materialism from inside the average person, we are eradicating it from the elite as well. This is because all, whether rich or poor, share this culture of separation from nature. Technology and the progressive march of civilization might be questioned widely only when it's all leveled by petrocollapse or some related, similar process involving the toppling of the global corporate economy. Perhaps climate change or financial meltdown will knock Humpty Dumpty economics off its perch of maximum production for maximum overpopulation. After all, it is not possible for one person to single-handedly expunge materialism and individualism from anyone else - even our own children who are of course raised in a cultural context.

We can be a good parent, good son or daughter, good friend and citizen, and still not be highly valued by materialistic society. We can be those things and not be living responsibly if we are individualistic and are surrounded by material things. This is the dilemma: decent people are now asked to do even more (or refrain from doing certain things). Instead of participating in overconsumption, whether as Americans or up-and-coming Chinese car drivers, we must reject it or at least be ready to leave it behind. Or, natural processes- whether in the guise of peak oil or the Earth's reaction to climate abuse - will make the decision for us. The new environmental movement was passed up in the early 1970s by most people, when the world had a chance to change course.

Those of us trapped in industrial society or threatened by it - everyone and everything - are perhaps the unluckiest generation ever, when we attach costs such as ecological devastation and gross inequity. Some of our biggest complaints such as sexism and racism are hugely magnified by industrial society and its workings. The culture that brought about industrial society is the same one that did not learn from its errors at the outset, when resource abuse and expansion took its toll in Mesopotamia and moved on like a predatory cancer: from Iraq to North America and now finally back to the source to wreak destruction impacting the whole world.

Meanwhile, amassing knowledge of sustainable living is only prudent in a time of overspecialization and high vulnerability to complex systems and unaccountable, distant authorities. Although consumers may be too dense and lazy today to change proactively to deal with the fact that local food production is wise when the average piece of food travels 1,500 miles, we may have to write off these unfortunate folks for the moment as we go about preparing our own closer relationship with nature. We are too fragile and out of touch, much like those in a 1960s song who have "arms that can only lift a spoon." We must also work on our relationships with each other:

The reforming of tribes has been going on right under consumer society's nose since the 1960s; a few aware people are biding their time. So, we must continue trying to come together as neighbors, families, band members, comrades, and communitarians. The answers are not waiting for us on the desks of government officials, nor in corporate advertising campaigns or news programs. Is academia helping much? It mainly caters to employers and the corporate bottom line.

Every decade the modern man is appreciably weaker. He is more dependent on technology and has less wild nature around him. He is less likely to use basic, traditional skills to accomplish something for himself. Instead, he can buy it. He has less family around to participate in an activity, as other family members can be elsewhere being good consumers, students, workers or soldiers. He is more likely to be alone and is surrounded by plastic claptrap. What he thinks he needs to know is less likely to be found in his head or in others' heads such as his elders'; he gets it from a computer.

Does the advantage of having more television channels and a smaller mobile telephone make up for his shrinking humanity? And with the voluntary, growing dependence on petroleum, the modern man's vulnerability only grows.

"And I'm wrapped in my armor

But my things are material

And I'm lost in confusions

'Cause my things are material…"

- Andmoreagain, from Love's 1967 album Forever Changes

The whole human being is loving, aware, skilled, realistic, ecological, self-educating, and ready to stand up to campaigns of fear. Madison Avenue, Hollywood, organized religion, and the Bush Administration are just some of the more obvious manipulators using fear to control our behavior and keep us in line. Rejecting the hype of fear mongering is also to escape the divide-and-conquer strategy of those intent on taking all they can for their personal gain. As the poet 1 Wise African points out, we can be fingers or together be a fist. Or a hand cupped to give someone water.

What can be done

In answer to the question about our Achilles heel of individualism and materialism, "What do we do about it?", we can first acknowledge that individualism and materialism go together. One breeds the other, but when one starts to deal with one of these afflictions he or she immediately starts to deal with the other. The main problem the modern consumer has is in failing to question the official story:

We are the best people, the chosen ones. What we do is right, and everyone envies us. However, even if you don't buy that, we offer such amazing opportunities for advancement, achievement and learning that you must accept society as justly in control of much of your life - even as we exploit nature and humans to the breaking point. Okay, we're destroying nature, and there will always be poor, but technology may save us. Our brutish forebears would be amazed at our progress. We've walked on the moon! Slavery of Africans and genocide of native Americans? That's just the past, and only liberals bring it up.

However many grains of truth the above rendition of society's message may contain, it has to be questioned and replaced most urgently. This means thinking for ourselves. If we do so, it can be a lonely experience and it may mean being ostracized and earning less money, if we dare to talk differently as we question the official story. But, we have taken a major step in self-liberation.

Taking action on what we know and learn is another ball of wax. Most people, regardless of what awareness they gain, leave action and risk for others. Bringing our knowledge to action is necessary for wisdom. The reluctance to take action is akin to refusing to learn basics about life. But, assuming we are not avowed armchair cultural revolutionaries, and we profess to want to do something for our lives and community despite or because of our repressive yet incompetent federal government, there is much action to take that does not require major sacrifice or knowing "rocket science."

Assuming we have learned that waiting for the next election and writing letters don't suffice to change policy or our materialistic, ecocidal culture - yet assuming we are not ready to risk arrest as if our future depended on taking our stand in the streets - we can inventory and consider actions we can take. Using one's dollar to reward local business and environmentally sound practices is by now an old idea. Punishing the huge corporations by not giving them a dollar is slightly more novel. The list is endless: rather than using a clothes drier that warms the globe, use a clothesline even if some neighbors would prefer that you warm the globe.

If one says, "I have no garden so I must purchase everything I eat," one can actually grow sprouts in jars in one's kitchen and avoid using energy for cooking. One can eliminate the refrigerator by adopting a different diet and shopping more frequently. When one does buy food or anything else, a canvas shopping bag can be used. One can adopt a hard rule to bring no plastic, or only bring a minimum of it, into one's home. Leaving the car at home or selling it and venturing out on foot or bicycle is smart to do from a health and exercise standpoint, as well as sparing the environment the pollution. This also saves money going to the oil industry, as does taking mass transportation to a large degree.

However, the above are baby-steps and only preparatory for what must come. As oil supplies dwindle, the ability to be even a "green consumer" dwindles too. So, it will come down to sharing the car with neighbors and sharing the oven so that energy (if available at all) is not wasted. For it is getting to know and trust one's neighbors that is the real alternative to petroleum; i.e., community, rather than the narrow approach of materials-substitution that is the hallmark of the

technologists and technocrats.

This is the change in culture that we can either contribute to and hasten or just await, as the socioeconomic and ecological price we will pay rises every day we delay. The option to deny a culture change or to fight fundamental change seems to be dwindling and being discredited rapidly, from what I've been observing in Washington DC where the Military-Industrial/Fossil Fuels Complex rules.

The most proactive and aggressive tactic against the global warming economy might be to build a campaign to stop buying new cars. If only used cars are purchased, this will sap the life blood out of the economy in few months. The Whole Human Being relishes using dollars meaningfully and bringing an end to what Congressman Roscoe Bartlett calls our national pigging out. Neither the Congressman nor I wish to see devastation or deprivaton. But, because painful adjustment to sustainable economics is overdue, the best approach is to create change rather than wait for it to hit.

We are all learning constantly, but some of us do so faster than others when it comes to seeking or accepting relevant information and concepts having to do with the real "only game in town": sustainable, cooperative living.

Life and culture change are not just about learning and taking action; they are also very much about living joyfully, proudly and convivially. Our human potential is stultified by such basic elements of society as employment or the welfare agencies, as well as by crafty, rich institutions such as the military. To reject these flat out without preparation or a safety-net of supportive friends and family is economic suicide. However, adopting some bartering, so as to enable exchange ordinarily thought to be out of reach to the average consumer, begins the transition to sustainable society.

We have great potential to please and support ourselves and others, so sharing our talents and creativity can replace some of the needless exchange known as shopping. For example, if one can paint a picture and one is in need of attending to one's health, one can offer a painting to someone skilled in massage and get treated in return. If one has no garden and is wasting food scraps that have been taken to the landfill (at a monthly cost), one can collect compostibles and bring the bucket (metal or wooden, not plastic!) to a gardener who will in turn share some produce.

The adventure of life is richest for the Whole Human Being, not the cluelessly comfortable consumer, even as we are all up against the pressures of conformity in these times of creeping fascism and global warming. Achieving pleasure in liberating ourselves from too many material things, and attaining solidarity with others, to replace less-efficient individualism, are in the offing. Enjoy your adventure, and please share with Culture Change your exploits and discoveries. Together we will change the world and save it, or we can have a good, honest time trying.

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