Social and Individual Breakdown: Pent up toward Collapse

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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The U.S. appears to be breaking down on all levels, probably taking the rest of the modern world with it. Noticing this helps us understand the hopelessness of our intrinsically flawed system. Also, recognizing breakdown is helpful for seeing impending collapse in a new light.

Breakdown should be seen in such a way to realize that order is becoming an illusion. Breakdown is preceding and adding to future collapse. Simultaneously there are myriad magnificent yet small-scale efforts to improve people's lives and the health of our Earth.
Overall, however, I detect a quickened intensity of breakdown across the board that cannot be cured under current conditions. It is manifested in many areas, such as minimal civic involvement in one's own life-and-death interest.

Those of us who are keeping to a routine, and have things relatively under control, are nevertheless unstable because of what's going on all around us. This applies to globalized societies mainly, although little-globalized societies are being devastated on some levels such as melting glaciers in the Andes and Himalayas.

Many in the U.S. still deny that their empire and general economy are heading toward thorough collapse. A short list of noticeable indicators might be enough to contradict adequately:

- Less family cohesion, exemplified by a divorce rate over 50%
- Popping of the financial bubble with associated massive job losses
- Wall Street bonus-greed
- The war machine and anti-terror sector hum along all the way to the bank
- Mother Nature either on the run or striking back

Knowing these things may help, but also hinder. Can the truth sustain you as your whole diet?

The 20th century was the most violent and disastrous in history, despite the whitewash of never-ending "progress" and the valiant but usually violent struggles for more justice. It is true that key, terrible things done have not been repeated. The Nazi death machine and the U.S. nuclear bombing of Japan were the most hideous developments, and have not been blatantly repeated.

Overpopulation was at play in the 20th century, when so many millions of people could become fodder or deemed "in the way" of others' designs. World War I was the beginning of the century's spikes of mass slaughter.

Economically and demographically, the 20th century also saw mass urbanization and vast changes in occupations, away from land-based and physical skills. Office jobs, at first based on paperwork and eventually digitized as well, became coveted when the alternatives were drudgery. Toward the end of the century the middle class dwindled while the prevailing drudgery became less physical and more service-oriented. The stay-at-home full time mother became a rarity, but the broken promise of materialism and leisure was obscured by (1) the gadgetry and distraction of consumer toys and (2) fear deliberately generated regarding xenophobic or domestic terrorism -- while much greater death from cigarets and car crashes went on without being seriously addressed.

The failure of industrialized, technological culture in the context of ecological overshoot has not been admitted in the corporate controlled media or by the state. Rather than dwell here and now on the interrelated disasters of peak oil, climate change and the toxifying of the planet, suffice to say little is admitted openly regarding the true state of our planetary plight. It is left to specialists such as climate scientists or fringe-intellectuals looking at peaking trends in resources still recklessly extracted.

As the social fabric began to unravel in the middle of the 20th century in the U.S. with the supremacy of the nuclear family, pains were taken from on high to reduce discrimination and to not repeat obvously fascistic policies. The United Nations, with its Declaration of Human Rights, the widespread yearning for peace by the youth movement of the 1960s, and acknowledgement of the environmental crisis all have given people the impression that lessons were learned after the heyday of the Axis. Post-war society seemed to be about positive reform, when Germany and Japan could be peacefully rebuilt, and strides were made in public health such as phasing out lead paint as well as, in some places, leaded gasoline. To bolster our sense of security and to calm the population, racism and segregation were officially frowned upon, resulting ultimately in an African-American U.S. President.

However, in the process we have all become much less secure and more agitated and disturbed. Keeping the growing population under control has translated to massively drugging people -- all who can afford it -- for diseases newly invented by petrochemical pharmaceutical companies. Breakdown of social and ethical standards have been slow enough to be almost imperceptible, such as in people's locking their doors even when they are home in the day time. A few decades ago one might only optionally lock a house when it would be unoccupied for days, even in urban areas. Car-jacking is a relatively new phenomenon, and can be expected whenever one goes out after dark in highly populated Mexico City.

Reasons for the spreading breakdown are many, including eco-psychological. Being cut off from nature, as the formerly common land has all been fenced or paved, creates afflictions unknown to the human animal until very recently in our evolution. Of late the economic stress has ramped up tremendously, with many millions of workers losing most of their income as of 2008. The debt crisis for the individual and for nations is part of a breakdown in good sense. Fortunately, there are positive developments for some people as they gain more leisure through unemployment -- provided there's a preference for gardening and learning skills rather than watching television.

Peak oilists and deep ecologists have been pondering collapse for well over a decade, while some adherents anticipate healthy change -- with varying expectations of a painful price to pay to get there. The worse the picture gets and the more clearly the positive alternatives cry out for implementation, the more consensus builds for expecting collapse and (according to some of us) culture change.

But thinking about future collapse and preparing for it can distract us from acknowledging something just as significant: the accelerating breakdown of people's mental, physical and spiritual health. It is a cumulative crisis attributable to factors such as poor diet, extra stress, meaningless work (or none at all), knowledge of global warming, and unending war by a slick leader who was supposedly going to end it.

One source of general breakdown is the isolation produced by wireless technology whereby people look at screens and keyboards more than they do people in their own family. [What am I doing, telling all this to a laptop as I press my skin against toxic plastic, radiating myself? I may simply be participating in the Earth's greatest breakdown as a precursor to total collapse.] The additional information accessed through techno-toys and the growing number of connected instant communicators have not delivered us from any significant problems, but instead have worsened them.

When divided we are conquered, and machines and gadgets do divide us, increasingly so. If we don't have them, we are left out of what little social interaction remains, including serious opportunities in school and employment. Because we are now so dependent on machines and ephemeral digital information that control our very lives, we need to start

sharing computers intelligently while emancipating ourselves from them -- before they let us down utterly when the grid goes down and batteries no longer arrive at stores (along with the industrial food).

Meanwhile, Isolation as consumers takes a toll on the human need for close connection. Unprecedented separateness through technology and the market-culture run amok weakens us progressively. Vain attempts at romance are no match for the withering barrage of negative stimuli.

Deferred health maintenance: Even if one can afford the doctors, drugs and surgeries, one's ability to take the time to heal through total rest, or to obtain the needed exercise and massage each week, is severely limited and means deterioration of the body, mind and spirit.

Powerlessness through (1) lack of true freedom, (2) not having all the necessities of life, (3) being incapable due to missing basic skills to utilize resources -- through dependence on shopping and relying on specialists whose longevity is questionable -- only magnifies in a world breaking down.

To mitigate these deficiencies would be possible if the beauty of experiencing the Earth and her bounty were not in effect out of reach. The more modern a people is, the more it seems to not know how to live. Exceptions to the trend can be found anywhere and anytime, if one knows what to look for, and one makes the effort to reach out.

Is the Breakdown Process Out of Control?

Those who do not feel there is pervasive breakdown are limited to (A) those who ought to admit that good fortune applies only to them, or (B) the shrinking portion of the population that has much leisure time and access to nature. For if one is able to spend ample amounts of money, or can enjoy a comfortable routine (or a not-too-disgusting commute to a "sick building," one can easily lose oneself in addictive stimuli such as unlimited food, drugs, alcohol, amusements, sex, quiet seclusion, tending one's children, and other activities that are more or less rewarding. But this is becoming the exception rather than the rule, as people find there is less and less likelihood of the technotopia commonly expected back in the 1950s for our deserving, inevitable future.

Because breakdown is denied, it will build and build until collapse hits and is characterized by an absence of restraints on behavior. The pent up pressure will unleash mass violence, both organized and haphazard, not seen on a global scale since the Nazis. The present breakdown and collapse ahead are on so many levels that it is difficult to give the process a comprehensive name. If climate chaos or petrocollapse are joined by fascistic attacks by governments and vigilantes, even without nuclear holocaust (so far not defused), there will be almost no constraints on desperate interactions. Violence and the attempt to avoid deprivation may override and drown out voices of reason and constructive examples of better living. This is why rural and waterborne survival-outposts will be in higher and higher demand.

Meanwhile, it is imperative for as much of the population as possible to prepare viable models of sustainability, as articulated in the Transition Towns movement, ecovillages, primitive skills circles, traditional crafts masters, and those strengthening community in many ways. Re-forming tribes may prove most crucial for people counting on others who now are only little-known neighbors.

Positive alternatives to breakdown, that would lessen or even prevent collapse, can be pursued until the urban scene may become insanely dangerous. A negative assessment or fear will prompt an exodus to escape anticipated unprecedented violence and to seek food in the countryside. Collapse and depopulation, if this be the price for petroleum dependence, will not take more than a few months because the human body cannot go without food longer

than fifty-some days (with good rest and sufficient, clean water). So the return of skilled, community-minded survivors back to their urban homes presents the chance to remake cities into food forests and ecovillage networks. If the social organization or deeper culture is not improved upon after collapse, to eliminate the tendencies of the exploitative and inequitable model dominating today, there may not be a future for humanity. We will depend on much cooperative restoration of our damaged ecosystem to be carried out as fast as possible. The individual will suddenly be serving the group first.

In the Radio Ecoshock program earlier this month titled "Toward Collapse" the case was clearly made with numerical physics that leveling the economy as we know it appears to be the only option for slashing greenhouse gases to avoid general extinction. The economy is a heat engine that cannot be modified sufficiently at this late juncture; this is scientific fact and wisdom. If you disagree and are wrong, and enough people go along with you, there will soon be no life left as we know it. There will be no green consumer future, in any event. The radio program also explored taking civilization down proactively but peacefully, acknowledging its dismal failure to safeguard humanity and other species.

However, the human potential is vast for positive efforts when unity and enlightened awareness have a chance to predominate. One example is singing the world into harmony. If we do not give a healthy, shared vibration a chance, signing up for love and peace now, the overall breakdown will only continue and make the ignominious 20th century look like a limited dress rehearsal for the final act and... curtains.

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Alex Smith interviews cloud scientist Tim Garrett and activist Keith Farnish on Radio Ecoshock: Culture Change February 23, 2010: "Toward Collapse"

Further reading:

Dissolve the U.S.: an Option for Proactive Change before Collapse - "Will Obama be a Greater Gorbachev?"

by Jan Lundberg,
18 December 2008

A return to tribes

by Jan Lundberg,
17 November 2005,
Culture Change Letter #114