The Silver Bullet Men

Contributed by Chris Harries
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The alchemists' dream is alive and well, just ask the blokes.

This is a story about men and their dreams -- alchemist dreams. Part science, part magic, part religion. Seriously, it's about our common future, so listen up!

Much has been studied and written about why women love to shop. In short, this innocent pastime apparently satisfies a basic and natural instinct: to gather. And this, according to the experts, explains why the ever-popular activity of shopping as a major recreation is particularly female. Men will go and buy a targeted item and then flee the store as quickly as possible, whilst women shop.

Far be it for me to lock in stereotyped behavior, there are of course many women who shun shopping in favor of more creative and enriching pursuits. But we can't avoid a logical conclusion that patterns of gender behavior have something to do with the way our brains are wired at birth.

This brings me to a phenomenon that appears to be much less studied, and it concerns a peculiar wiring of the male brain.

'Boys and their toys' (male affinity with technology) is also a well studied cultural phenomenon. From computer equipment, to power tools, to racy cars, to the latest invention in the market place… we blokes naturally gravitate to technology and most men I know secretly harbor at least one high-tech obsession. Or possession.

Like shopping is for women, this blokey behavior is a frequent source of harmless, lighthearted banter and we take it in our stride and carry on because… well… because we are hard wired, so it seems.

But it's the next level of exclusively male behavior that has fascinated me for many years. I am talking of certain men whose affinity with technology transcends mere passion, so as to become a quasi-religious experience. I am talking of good earnest blokes so besotted by their chosen technology that no logic, or persuasion, can shake their belief --
or their proselytizing ardor. The technology that excites their passion is

literally their church. I am talking of the knights in shining armor who earnestly believe that they have stumbled across the Holy Grail, the one and only salve for the world's ills.

Anybody who has worked in politics knows these guys well. They are the ones who persistently call and demand an interview, and write lengthy screeds, and complain long and hard that there is a conspiracy to silence them and to suppress the invention. In lowered tones, they confide in you that they have knowledge of the ultimate technology that can save the world, if only the powers that be would damned well listen!

Well, that's the extreme cases -- like burns patients, there are first, second and third degree casualties amongst those afflicted.

On so many occasions when I've given public talks and participated in web discussions on energy futures, there is always at least one such guy (this syndrome only afflicts men) in the audience who has in his grasp the triumphant Cornucopian solution – the silver bullet that will herald in a bright future for mankind. There's Peter, the cold fusion man. There's Kim, the solar-power-in-space man. There's Barry, the nuclear man. There's Gerald, the hot rocks man. There's Eddy, the fuel cell man. There's John the marine algae man. There… And so it goes.

At the hard end of those technological panaceas is the ultimate Holy Grail -- 'the infinite energy machine'. Not a year goes by without a wizened inventor claiming to have discovered one. Now, who wouldn't be thrilled to know that an infinite source of free energy -- like a fridge that never runs out of beer – can actually exist? Not surprisingly, many a gullible investor has been taken in by the prospect.

One of the most notable examples was the 'Stoern Orbo', launched with much fanfare in Britain in 2006. The proprietor's boast:

"Orbo produces free, clean and constant energy -- that is our claim. By free we mean that the energy produced is done so without recourse to external source. By clean we mean that during operation the technology produces no emissions. By constant we mean that with the exception of mechanical failure the technology will continue to operate indefinitely."

Six years later and the jury is still out. Still not one Orbo is on the market, or tested to satisfaction. I'm laying bets there will never be.

Common to these hard core devotees is a language that projects a golden future of plenty. Energy so cheap and bountiful that there would be no need to measure it. No pollution. No mining of fuel. All of this backed with ample statistics and charts and diagrams.

Amongst the more rounded technology enthusiasts is a simple starry-eyed outlook that helps to helps to maintain an easy truce between the various enthusiasts -- a shared belief that energy supply is the core of

humanity's problem, and the essential remedy is to switch technology. Beneath the surface, though, is a veritable war amongst them for technological supremacy, each accusing the other of overstating the plus sides and understating the downsides of their particular technology. The most bitter feud is that between the nuclear guys and the wind energy guys.

Over the years I've learned to respectfully and patiently listen to all these guys, and try to understand their technological choice and their rampant enthusiasm. But I've learned not to try to contest their science too much, nor shatter their delusion. Nor ask probing questions, like: "If the technology is so manifestly solid, why has an enterprising multinational not jumped at the chance to make big bucks out of it?"

For one thing, it is not possible to contest the science -- their belief is generally more about faith than it is about science, and who can argue against impregnable faith? And then… well, I am a bloke too… I have to confess to having an abiding fascination with technology too. So I listen.

In order to get to the bottom of this totally masculine phenomenon, we need to briefly go back to the time of the alchemists and see how that fascinating historical episode still carries over to the present day, when the dark old days of sorcery and magic are presumed to be over, where religion and science have parted ways.

Alchemy is an ancient tradition, underpinned by a belief that through science one could invent the mythical 'philosopher's stone'. Whoever found the magic formula would be capable of turning base metals (such as lead) into gold and that lucky inventor would also hold the secret to the elixir of life -- immortality and eternal youth. Through the ages many thousands of earnest men of science devoted their entire lives to this noble, yet fruitless, pursuit. They genuinely regarded themselves as serious chemists, though in hindsight we can see that alchemy was a curious mixture of science, mythology, religion and spiritualism.

And so it is today.

Now, I don't wish to belittle these guys, because they mean so well. And, for all I know, any one of them may be onto something useful. I don't wish to appear arrogant and would dearly love to be proved wrong. It is possible to marvel at elegant new technology and still be aware of its limits.

By and large these are the most earnest, dedicated, passionate people you could imagine. But, like anybody deeply infatuated with religion they tend to be smitten with an absolute, rock solid belief. They've found their holy grail.

And that's the scary bit. Scary because I believe that there's a strand of this magic pudding syndrome latent in every human breast. Don't we all really want to believe that the finite world that we inhabit is a magic

pudding after all, and that science will come to the rescue and… if we just wait a bit… then all will be well? Surely technology, which has provided for us so well in the past, will once again come to our rescue?

If only.

So, what of the future? The problem as I see it, is that this gender phenomenon is much more than merely a subject of intellectual curiosity. It is, in fact, fundamental to whether or not we, as a species, are able to forge a sustainable and sane future. The very same masculine imagination that brought about our dominant nexus in history is right now determining how we progress through these precarious, uncertain times ahead.

Albert Einstein, the ultimate scientist, ever a deep thinker, understood this human pathology all too well. “You cannot solve a problem from the same consciousness that created it,” he warned. “You must learn to see the world anew.”

Yet the allure of the silver bullet is so strong in our collective unconscious that it is still manifestly determining our future, and blinding us to our potential fate -- inhibiting us from making the necessary deep cultural and behavior changes that we need to be making in order to survive and prosper.

At a time when our planetary civilization is being confronted by a dizzying array of chronic problems -- from climate change, to desertification, to ocean acidification, to depletion of major resources -- the silver bullet men, the modern day alchemist, the allure of the elusive technical fix… may very well be our civilization’s Waterloo.

[Author’s note: ‘Silver bullet’, ‘quick fix’, ‘miracle cure’, ‘holy grail’, ‘magic pudding’ – these are all metaphors describing the much same phenomenon. The Magic Pudding is an all time favorite classic of Australian children's literature. It tells of a magic pudding which, no matter how often it is eaten, always reforms in order to be eaten again. The pudding is owned by three companions who must defend it against pudding thieves who want it for themselves.]

Chris Harries is a long term environmental advocate, writer, campaigner and website editor. He writes from his home state, Tasmania, Australia. He sent the above article to share with Culture Change readers.