From Black Gold to Black Crack: U.S. addiction to petroleum -- one man's response

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Humanity has had a century of unprecedented mass insanity that has culminated in overstepping our ecological bounds. The time has come to look reality in the face. Although the scientific consensus is overwhelming, behavior dominates along the lines of discredited denial.

Of two root causes of our dilemma, the first is well known, as popularized by George W. Bush: "America is addicted to oil." The other is that the dominant culture of materialism has relied upon violent expansion for thousands of years.

Let us decide if we have an individual response and a personal manifesto to share. We may find that the key to security -- community and mutual aid amidst healthy natural environments -- can free us from the slavery of industrial domestication.

First let us see if we can agree on what humanity did to itself and Earth, and see where we're at.

We are fooled by our history teachers and others peddling the dominant narrative to believe progress for our culture is unmatched, despite glaring, lethal flaws. Just as dangerous, as we now see painfully, is the idea that it must continue and grow forever. More of us see it, but don't we just have to have all those nice, cheap Chinese goods shipped over to Consumerland via oil-burning cargo ships?

The crisis of population growth is still far from getting under control when urbanization is considered part of progress. Yet, pervasive non-local food & water systems present a problem for vulnerable multitudes: an inevitable, swift loss of ample petroleum can blow up into unprecented deprivation.

Some admit we've achieved the ability to destroy ourselves and all life through nuclear radiation. And we are seeing pre-catastrophic global warming now, based just on greenhouse gas emissions of decades ago -- due to built-in delays in the climate system and the carbon cycle.

But such essential ecological facts are apparently swept aside by headlines on what can be called our artificial reality, characterized by Internet media, propaganda about the U.S. "withdrawal" from the Middle East, and superficial differences between the two wings of the corporate state: the Democrats and Republicans. News and other mainstream media downplay both the oil agenda of modern warmaking and the global economy's dependence on dwindling, climate-changing petroleum.

A real withdrawal, in the drug addiction sense, that pertains to ecological and cultural reality, would be to cease the senseless spread of toxic petroleum around the landscape -- whether it is plastic debris or asphalt paving of good land. Few people have questioned these aspects of our glorious century of unparalleled pollution, although awareness has begun to rise. But car culture as an aspect of oil addiction -- regardless of cleaner propulsion attempts -- translates into little-questioned mass violence: every 50 minutes a new car is produced that will kill someone, and every 50 seconds a new car is produced that will injure someone [Environmental Forecasting Institute, 1993].

Looking at an almanac of Eurocentric history -- the version that Westerners believe is by far the main story of humanity -- we saw in the early 1900s a sharp rise in social strife in many parts of the world. Brought about largely by insatiable greed and political ambition involving colonialism and extreme social stratification, the world stage featured wars, revolutions, strikes, and other manifestations of overcrowding aggravated by gross inequity and corruption. Progress such as women's getting the right to vote did not appreciably change major trends.

Black Crack addiction of a hundred years

World War I was brewing one hundred years ago, kicked off by designs for oil supply to power navies and industry. Persian Gulf oil via the newly begun Berlin-Baghdad Railway was what the Central Powers were counting on, when the British reacted militarily. History books have preferred to point to Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination as the cause of World War I. Either way, what ensued was The Great War, in which millions were slaughtered senselessly. And what came of it? More of the same, despite some efforts to avoid similar open conflict. Recent decades' wars have featured a successively rising proportion of civilian casualties.

Any revolutionary thinking has been, during the last century as well as today, about redistributing the pie by fighting enemies -- without questioning the culture and system giving rise to the problems flaring up. Meanwhile, the mistake of petroleum-fed growth in population and industry is lost on backward-thinking growth addicts. They want another big fix, with no end in sight but a "national Katrina."

So we have had a catastrophic century of the Oil Age with geopolitical military contests, overpopulation, and, as we started to notice in the 1960s, environmental degradation at an alarming and perhaps terminal rate. Culture Change has explored these trends and pointed out the inadequacy of reformism through the technocratic fix and politics-as-usual. We have tried equally, as independent journalists and activists, to present a cultural alternative to ecocide, wars for oil, and the minimal-community way of life known as consumerism. But we've had to point out, to the chagrin of those preferring to emphasize positive developments, that Black Crack has the ability to kill much more on its way out. We've made the case for anticipating collapse as a societal force to plan around and get past. We have showcased viable, convivial alternatives to modern petroleum living.

Positive approaches not yet sufficing

The challenge now is to present something more effective. Our minor successes have apparently not been enough. For decades since our founding in 1988, just before the Exxon Valdez spill and the first U.S. war on Iraq, we have made sustained efforts such the national paving moratorium, Auto-Free Times magazine, pedal-power produce, a sail transport network, depaving, and civil disobedience to protest logging ancient forests. During all this time we occasionally batted around the idea of, or speculated on, a spiritual awakening or "a new religion."

However, few people want to be "guided by Gaia" or join a humanist eco-village network -- both of which we would like to see grow by leaps and bounds. "The herd" seems to prefer in belief systems not about lifestyle change to slash energy use and usher in local economics. Instead, there is denial across the political spectrum, including to a degree in the Mayan Calendar/Aliens/Magical Thinking or New Age movement. Is it really a new consciousness, or another popular band-aid that soothes people's fear and confusion? This question was the theme of my previous essay on Culture Change.

Thinking critically about our activism by including historical analysis, we've had to do more than identify the preceding century of social chaos dressed up as the march of the greatest civilization. We have identified today's supreme challenge for survival. Since the approach of "more programs" (as pointed out by author Daniel Quinn) has proven to change our lives very little, and does not promise to deliver us from our species' plight, there is a need to offer and adopt new ideas and examples of better living to replace the failed system collapsing all around us.

One man's response centers on aspects of culture change

As an individual who is part of the loose group known as Culture Change and the Sail Transport Network -- with thousands of readers, fellow-travelers, supporters and friends -- I feel I can and must make another move toward a workable world system: a culture (rather, diverse cultures) for peace and ecological sanity. I'm doing this for myself as well.

I could, for all I know, be starting to participate in these social movements more effectively and help lay the groundwork for basic economic and political change. This course includes a growing spiritual or planetary awareness to guide my life. This path relates to many others' hopes and endeavors to guide their lives as well. We have found that materialistic competition is leading us no-where but down a slippery slope to a toxic, radioactive cesspool as bad as any Hell in our mythology. So, when societal programs and movements have for the most part failed, and we are out of time to save nature as we know it, it is time for drastic, wise action. It is my conviction that it must come more from the heart than based on mere information via technology or working solely within the present system.

The approach I have arrived at is personal, but it is open to any amount of participation by many kindred spirits and willing activists. It is by no means the only way or necessarily the best way to change one's life for a changing world in need of saving. But it is about radical, fundamental change that reflects an overdue response to worsening social and environmental conditions. Moreover, my response is for a convivial, participatory, do-it-yourself approach that does not require bureaucratic, foundation funding from Wall Street holdings, approval from government agencies, or academic credentials. Anyone can get involved in a life-change, decide to be free, and try something creative. My own expression of this impulse is not the only way. To cover my bets, perhaps a two-fold approach makes the most sense.

Drawing upon my personal experience and passions, I have decided to pursue as much as I can the making of original music and promoting sail power. We shall see whether putting sails on the water joyously takes up much more of my time than song writing, performing or recording. The reasons for this turn in my career and life are not necessarily logical from a financial or political point of view. But an individual strategy from the heart and the spirit sometimes calls others to do something similar in their own way.

I came from a privileged oil-industry related background, helpful for understanding our petroleum addicted society. Lundberg Survey was good schooling, although excruciating. Additional insight was loaded upon me as a kind of karma, when a fantastic family unraveled due to Big Oil money through which we thought we would continue a great life.

Fortunately for me, I have as much of a philosophical attitude as one could about my family curse of oil money. It's a bit of a struggle to compartmentalize the lingering, invasive realities of our oil legacy as I keep steering toward a minimum-oil lifestyle -- until Black Crack topples from high in the saddle. "He's badly built and he walks on stilts, watch out he don't fall on you" -- Bob Dylan, Most Likely You Go Your Way and I Go Mine.

(1) An eco-musical approach

For over two decades I have enjoyed making eco-music in many situations, both public and intimate. This kind of music includes socially conscious lyrics that are more than calls for love, peace, protest or revolution, but rather integrating human relations with revering nature and all life. Eco-music can be done solo or in concert, on a scale of simplicity for one-on-one experience or for mass rallies. It can be low-tech and for the moment, or recorded for mass distribution and exposure. But it does need to be primarily acoustic rather than heavy on electronic, digital processing.

One reason for my faith in music is its source: since my music and lyrics come mostly from dreams, I feel that the songs are closer to subconscious reality than if I were to sit down and create something from my left-hemisphere brain. This is just my own way, largely an unschooled approach that sometimes gets good results. I can collaborate with many instruments and vocals styles, or just offer song material for lyricists and producers. As for a little success, without much effort I got our band The Depavers on National Public Radio and CNN-International with my song "Have a Global Warming Day" in Kyoto at the U.N. Climate Change Conference in 1997.

Complementing a musical message before a group of people (and other animals) is giving talks, such as on topics and events recounted in my autobiographical book Songs of Petroleum.

(2) Sail transport

Having sailed half way around the world and lived on various sailboats, I eventually fell into organizing for greater use of sail power. Rather than limiting it to recreation or being a boat-bum, I have glimpsed the rising use of sailboats for smaller scale commerce and passenger service in order to reduce our carbon footprint and emancipate ourselves from dwindling petroleum supply. I have called sail transport a prime "physical connection" for sustainable communities (e.g., as envisioned by Transition Towns).

Along with pedal power and horses for transporting people and crops from aquatic environments to inland communities, sail power goes so far as to compensate for a local economy's limitations of its own produced goods. This is crucial in these times of increasing environmental degradation that has impinged upon ecological carrying capacity. So a surplus grown here or there can be offered to another community with a particular deficit, allowing more people to thrive via exchanges than otherwise would be possible.

The Sail Transport Network was founded in 1999 in the Puget Sound, whence I had moved with a co-visionary. She and I believed systemic collapse was inevitable for urban areas, especially since our home of Arcata, California did not seem to be living up to its pro-community aspirations or hype. I had originally visualized around 1997 an ocean-land interface by intending to live up a river where I would farm with my family and friends, and paddle or sail downriver to the sea where an ocean-going sailboat would be moored at the mouth.

Since 1999, when oil prices were so ridiculously subsidized to prevent much interest in alternative transport, the Sail Transport Network (STN) has made strides. It had to go almost dormant for a few years, until Dmitry Orlov sent us a draft for "The New Age of Sail" which we edited and published in 2006. His brilliant article kicked off renewed interest for sail transport at a time of maximum interest in peak oil, and resulted in a couple of new STN projects in 2007. Since then the sail power movement has grown, and one expression is a for-profit corporation that some of my colleagues and I have launched.

We have decided that a capitalist and cooperative venture might be a most effective tool for attracting interest and support for sail power as an extremely efficient and almost free form of renewable energy. We have tried, in our collective experience of decades -- perhaps totaling over a century in combined years of nonprofit, activist projects -- to achieve something approaching mainstream recognition, but have not enjoyed triumphant success. Meanwhile, big business and high-tech have dominated in the recent climate of worshiping "innovation." So, what if the technology is basically ancient? Sails and rigging systems can be modified or engineered for additional efficiency, and auxiliary power from renewable energy can make sail power more reliable for schedules.

Take just two statistics that herald a sea-change: Today's cargo vessels that burn oil have had to save money and stay busy by slowing down to just 15 knots on average -- the speed of the old clipper ships of 150 years ago. Secondly, just sixteen of the largest vessels of tens of thousands of boats burning bunker oil are emitting sulfur and other pollutants on the scale of all the world's cars. Do you think sail power is technology whose time has come for a renaissance? Perhaps you've wondered how your coffee, chocolate and natural rubber will come to you in a post-peak oil world. If not by bunker fuel, then yet-to-be-developed propulsion systems -- or sail boats today?

We have developed a three-pronged plan to advance sail power, primarily in the Pacific Ocean and on the West Coast of the Americas, particularly around central and northern California. It's a big ocean and a huge world, and we don't aim for domination or monopoly. We would like to see a thousand flowers bloom. Indeed, Europe and other maritime regions are ahead of the rest of the world in sail transport, whether traditionally or as a revival.

If you would like to get involved with us in Santa Cruz and the San Francisco Bay area, or you want to start something anywhere, it would be wonderful to hear from you. Please visit www.SailTransportNetwork.com and email us at info [at] culturechange.org.

In this way, with sail-based trade and travel, perhaps we can proactively "live the future now." This intention is from our hearts, hoping to help put behind us the century of chaos, violence and waste that shows no sign of abating fast enough. Must we fall on our faces before "walking away from civilization" [certainly from dysfunctional aspects - ed.], as recommended and foreseen by Daniel Quinn?

The home stretch for home port if not a safe harbor

Whether out of fear about the future, or from doubting one's organizing and methods for activism, it seems we must all alter our approach personally. If we have common cause, then a collective approach blossoms. The Occupy movement is such a development, but its vision and goals are almost as uncertain as its prospects for wider acceptance and ultimate success. It is at least a physically active, nonviolent phenomenon to watch and support.

I have tried to do what I can within Occupy, and I may continue somehow. But my role or destiny might be as a peripheral supporter beyond the immediate fray, with my complementary activities of eco-music and sail transport.

This personal manifesto comes at a time of more uncertainly than ever. Culture Change can continue as a nonprofit organization requiring financial support, or perhaps there are more effective strategies. Will I continue to make progress with my family's division having to do with Big Oil? Is one's survival in this economic climate so doubtful that issuing manifestos or trying to intensify efforts of musical activism & sail transport amounts to just dreaming when we're on the verge of unprecedented social upheaval? These are unknowns, but perhaps you agree that the usual approaches do not seem to be working. What will be your own approach in these fast-changing times? If unsure, there's always growing food and getting to know your neighbors better!

I look forward to hearing from you.

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Note: this article's second to the last paragraph was edited down, as was a previous paragraph beginning "I came from a privileged oil-industry related background", in January 2013.