A strange feeling as a way of life

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Making sense of our predicament, shaping our future

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Is everything alright? It should be, but it increasingly feels like it's not -- even though we may have enough to eat and have a comfortable roof over our heads. We can go buy anything we imagine we need. Besides more war and a corporate-lackey government, what's wrong with our lives in what's supposed to be a democracy?

This question has been explored by many social philosophers. Some answers have emerged. But they usually don't offer a realistic, current analysis of what's happening to the economy and infrastructure of "developed, rich" countries. Nor do they flesh out well the likely scenarios of a world without abundant exosomatic energy as we've come to expect with electricity, transport and petroleum-grown/distributed food.

If the world has become an ugly place because of civilization, few people dare oppose something so monumental as what's assumed to be the totality of exalted, wondrous human history. Civilization. Is it forever? Do we have any control over our lives or the future?

The isolation of daily existence that lacks village/tribal culture takes a constant toll, but it's not closely analyzed, quantified or publicized. For that could interfere with profits and getting people to keep going to work. And nothing is allowed to interfere with mass education's purpose of conformity and brainwashing.

We are instead told, through Big Brother's messages (government and corporate media), that everything is normal and part of amazing progress. Like the combatant told to get back on the battlefield to kill and die, when the psychiatric analysis conveniently denies shell-shock and battle fatigue, the worker or consumer must carry on and smile away the day. So we soldier on as regimented and industrial units aware of some things wrong, but not able to pinpoint the real trouble perhaps. Distractions can soothe while digging our graves.

Some of us are more aware or concerned about today's threatening state of the world than others, but we have trouble admitting that we've been significantly dehumanized. In today's cultural expectations for the elite and celebrities, everyone else is inconsequential and allowed to aspire to hyperconsumerism as the goal of "life."

Young modern people often cope with the conditions of alienation by having someone else address it: they seek refuge and solace in musical groups' lyrics and the artist's image of freedom and honest expression. Idolatry of musicians (usually poets) is relatively recent, only decades old, for the masses of Western peoples. For the very few individuals, authors serve as moral and artistic leaders. Tom Robbins, Edward Abbey and Daniel Quinn are among the few who have serious cults about them, in a loose and positive sense. James Howard Kunstler and Richard Heinberg sit atop a most practical new genre, petrocollapse, gaining them conscious adherents.

Outside one's world of favorite music and books, or, in the more common case, television or video games, there is a constant assault on the sensibilities of our animal and spiritual selves. Besides the hard pavement and lack of nature (a lawn does not quite qualify) stained with toxic oil, with exhaust hovering about, the refuges of the supermarket or even the health food store are hardly fulfilling or truly welcoming. They are experiences of packaging, plastic touching food, and the roar of fossil-fueled machines for cooling and freezing. Same with many restaurants, except upscale ones that most of us cannot afford: they are noisy experiences, where the music played -- usually techno and of no lyrical importance -- barely disguises the machines' hum.

The amount of food and products shipped from afar is astounding. The abundance and affluence represented by a single Whole Foods Market is such that one should wonder how it can keep going in terms of shipping and quantities. How much the customer questions this petroleum-fired frenzy to satiate with a fleeting cornucopia is not known, but is not significant if we judge by action. The average person does not lift a finger to produce food locally in any way, even if it can lower one's cost, improve health, reduce global warming, cut petroleum consumption, and offer social opportunities.

The workers in these markets, restaurants and other retail stores are mere units for production with no say over business practices or, almost as rarely, over environmental policy. Wages are not enough to survive on without combining households with other people. The minimum-wage, poor-benefit slavery is not quite questioned; proof is that unions are weak and grassroots organizing such as wildcat strikes are exceedingly

rare.

One reason for the lack of resistance to stultifying and dead-end conditions is poor health and low mental energy via pharmaceutical drugs. Half the people are on some antidepressant or mood-altering drug, and a good many more are on pain killers, antibiotics, tranquilizers, sleeping pills, cold medicine, and more. As discussed in Culture Change Letter #45, Dec. 2, 2003 ("Brain control of the masses via pollutants"), the constant exposure to toxic chemicals serves as mind control: Carbon monoxide, lead, and fluoride are only a few. Hormones in food, pesticides residues and estrogenic plastics are influencing not just health but the future of families and the collective state of mind. Younger and younger menstruation, and birth defects of boys feminized by chemicals in plastics, are more and more common and swept under the rug. The human race becomes weaker and less wild day by day. The domestication of the human is our downfall, but is championed by the capitalist and bureaucrat. There are even those who enslave themselves through their mental attitude, to emulate their masters, as Steven Biko and Bob Marley reminded us.

As all these problems keep going unaddressed and allowed to worsen, it is no wonder that our very existence is under threat without a fight against climate disruption. Is it so very hard for people to imagine living in different ways -- some just minor changes anyone can do -- that we must jump off "the ecological cliff like motorized lemmings" (to quote our featured cartoonist Andy Singer, from his cover art of an Auto-Free Times magazine)?

Perception from on high is disturbing

Climbing to the top of my nearest hill in San Francisco, my purpose is not to enjoy the view but to experience a bit of fresh air and nature. Some birds dwell in these urban islands of trees, bushes and soil. So few people are there, but they are happy, relaxed and friendly (unless deranged and out to rob). I find the view of San Francisco Bay and the megalopolis most disturbing, seeing in all directions the industrial activity and oil-fueled trade of questionable imported products. Massive port facilities dwarf the human scale of sustainable import/export. A very small number of sailboats for pleasure can't quite offer a vision of renewable-energy travel and exchange. Passenger planes take off, military jets show off their ear-splitting capabilities, all against the backdrop of polluted air that is warming in general thanks to commercial activity and the mindless consumption by the individual. The hills are full of roads and energy-wasting houses. It's not like this everywhere; the hills around Kyoto are pitch black at night, for they consist of forest, trails and small, outdoor temples.

Seven million people surround me in this metastasized, metropolitan area. Those among them who really care whether Barry Bonds used steroids to hit baseballs, or what pregnant celebrity has checked into a drug rehab facility, are not likely to be trying to live lightly on the planet. Normal citizens under the spell of mass media want to consume, and be given answers and easy fixes. Such citizens, I suspect, would argue about the color-coordination of the shoes and handbag of the person in front of them in the line, like sheep, to the slaughterhouse. For they are already there in line, as they want to know badly what's on cable TV and what's in the freezer to eat. They may get what they want tonight, and again, and again, but it will come to an abrupt end, and will people pick up a shovel to plant food or pick up the gun to take others' food? That depends on the area affected, the culture (urban U.S. or otherwise), and population size.

Why should I be disturbed by what I see now, when all is basically calm? Or feel uneasy as I putter about in the safety of my comfortable home? Is not San Francisco and the surrounding area a great city, with many wonderful people and activities to appreciate? What about the noble struggles of valiant, compromised hard-working people, or the dysfunctional and disabled folk who are really kind? The social injustice that is still pervasive, in our vaunted age of scientific and technological prowess, is outrageous and occupies many of the best hearts and minds in the world who live in our very midst. Much of what ails people, it is thought, is that they do not have enough cheap, affordable energy or material things that are supposed to both satisfy and uplift. More public funds for health care, through an end to costly, imperialist wars, would be the ticket to a healthy society, in the eyes of more and more.

Except, that altruistic aspiration is becoming clouded with the uncertainty and fright growing around our awakening to climate change. In the buzzing Bay Area and every other large and small city, we are behaving as if there is no threat to the climate and thus our future survival as a species. Just looking around at the unceasing traffic, it is clear that basic, radical but easy solutions are being kept on the shelf or buried. Tiny changes, usually just initiatives that don't threaten the current life style (e.g., different engines), are called "green." Green this and green that. But the big "greening" will be the rediscovery of community and working with others as if our survival depends on our collaboration as equals. Our bosses and political leaders have been as useful in the needed transition as -- to borrow an expression from my late father -- tits on a bull.

As I pointed out in a CBS Radio Network interview aired Sept. 21, 2007, with Dan Raviv, we have caused and are witnessing such rapid changes in climate that the planet is approaching a state not seen in 55 million years. So I did add to general paranoia, but I did not do it gratuitously. For I was explaining why I had gone, at that point, 16 days without any nourishment whatsoever in the Climate Emergency Fast. I also mentioned solutions such as car-free living and slashing petroleum use now, rather than waiting for the renewable energy technofix. I had to bring up two more scary situations we cannot just wipe away with an ideal election outcome: we have arrived at peak oil, and we all have plastics

in our bodies.

I have written 168 columns and reports before this one on culturechange.org, exploring our dominant culture's weaknesses and fatal flaws, and identifying examples of destructive policies and individuals. The bad guys are not really the problem, and the good guys will not save us. We have to be our own leaders. We can do two things to help our own cause as individuals, as members of our true community just ahead, and as a species. I believe those two things are

(1) to appreciate how dependent modern society is on a broken system of exploitation of both nature and our fellow human beings, and face that we are thus facing imminent collapse. It is economic/financial, related to energy. It is also related to both our bodily and ecological health that has been compromised, as outlined in the beginning of this essay. Climate chaos has been assured and it is widely known, but most people sit on their hands as the executioner prepares to swing the axe. Do I have to spell out that we ought to stop sitting on our hands, and disarm the executioner by ceasing our own fossil-fueled self-destruction?

(2) In the absence of a movement over the past few decades to deal with these issues most meaningfully, when smaller collective actions would have still made a major difference, we must resign ourselves to (A) seeing "nature bat last" and knock us out of the ball park. That's a train wreck we can no longer stop, although we can slow it down a tad and allow for some survivors. The other runaway train is (B) the collapsing economy. Smoke and mirrors are keeping it alive, such as with "free trade agreements" such as CAFTA, the Central American Free Trade Agreement. Like other such schemes, it will open more areas to exploitation and ramping up of exports and petroleum usage -- even if for a short while as oil dwindles quickly. With these two main train wrecks (A and B) disposing of society as we know it, our hopes must be in retaining and reviving models of sustainability. This website has dwelled on them, and has described tools of sustainability as well; they are not really "doom and gloom" unless we allow it and we abhor change.

When we finally find ourselves unable to keep up the treadmill of high-energy economic activity such as employment and shopping, chaos will quickly ensue. We will then become painfully aware of the reality of overpopulation. We will yearn for some productive land and clean water, but there hasn't been enough to go around for some time here and in most parts of our human-heavy world. To "get by" comfortably or exuberantly -- expanding the economy and population -- we tapped the Earth's store of fossil energy, to the tune of anywhere from six to ten Earths' equivalent of sustainable photosynthetic energy and nonrenewable resources.

I am in just one part of the industrialized world, in a large, sophisticated city filled with thrill seekers concerned more with consuming than changing their consciousness and saving the world. But I remain hopeful of a return to the raising of mass awareness as happened in the 1960s. The awakening was not complete, and change was thwarted by secret government programs and the ongoing lure of technological gold, one might say. People went back to sleep. But we still have music that can change the world, and we have power we are letting lie dormant for now. San Francisco is the Western Hemisphere's leader in banning petroleum plastic bags, and the city has banned its own use of plastic water bottles. Maybe this is rather significant for our common future.

The global peak in oil extraction has been recognized by the City and County Of San Francisco, and the crisis is being explored for mitigation in part through education of the citizenry. I am honored to have been appointed by the Board of Supervisors on Oct. 4th to be a member of the new Peak Oil Preparedness Task Force. On it I can only try to share my knowledge and my enthusiasm for meaningful social change through both policy and individual life-style transformation. The goal in my heart and mind is to help point the way to a "new" culture of frugal, local energy use and climate-saving daily living for our precious Earth and all its species. Be assured the technofix is not going to get a free pass on my watch, nor, I suspect, from my esteemed fellow task force members.

With some luck, solidarity, hard work and widespread openness in these increasingly "interesting times," maybe my "strange feeling" will no longer be "a way of life," but will give way to a more fulfilled sense of purpose buoyed by tangible results on the bioregional level.

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Andy Singer's website:

andysinger.com
-- Dear reader, did you see the one at the top of the page?

City Repair Project's co-founder is architect Mark Lakeman. This group has managed to get Portland, Oregon city code to allow any intersection to be converted into a neighborhood community center. See drawing below, by Andy Singer. City Repair website:

cityrepair.org

William R. Catton, author of Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change, Foreword by Stewart Udall

"Overextension: our American way of life is not sustainable" by Chris Clugston, in Culture Change:

culturechange.org/cms

"Fasting for the climate and self: The Climate Emergency Fast continues" by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #166, Sept. 12, 2007

culturechange.org/cms