Collapse Psychosis: Navigating the Madness

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It's happening daily now, almost hourly -- rampant eruptions of violence throughout the so-called developed world. As civilization unravels, the uncivilized behavior of humans is becoming viral, and the culture of empire is quite simply going mad as its values, assumptions, and reasons for existing are evaporating with dizzying speed.
For those who are and have been collapse-aware for some time, it is important not only to make sense of the epidemic violence, but to incorporate skillful responses to it.

First, I believe we need to deeply discern what is actually happening psychologically. The current outbreaks of violence are about more than unemployment and financial stressors. Yes, job loss, bankruptcy, foreclosure, homelessness, and loss of health care are breaking people and communities in pieces. Yet something even more fundamental is seething beneath the surface -- something of which these losses are symptomatic.

Underlying the chaos is the reality of civilization's dissolution. But what does that actually mean?

For one thing, it means that civilization has been inherently infantilizing. It teaches its members that their reason for existing on earth is to consume -- that they have absolutely no other meaning or purpose but to produce money in order to spend it and thereby incessantly oil the machinery of maniacal, unrestrained growth. A world view of this kind can only result in a culture that has virtually no inner life -- a culture in which one's reason for being lies entirely outside of oneself. We're not talking compassion or altruism here as in mindfulness of the well being of others. That results only from a highly developed inner life that understands that consuming is a miniscule aspect of life based on fundamental survival needs and that is willing to put even survival needs on the back burner in order to support other members of the earth community.

Empire, which I use synonymously with civilization, is all about keeping the focus external to oneself for the purpose of enhancing the well being of a few dominant individuals in a strictly prescribed hierarchical system which encompasses all of the culture's institutions. From birth, citizens of empire are taught to serve that system by way of education, career choices, work, marriage, family, home ownership, political participation, and religion. When citizens reach a certain age, they are thrown away by the culture because they no longer have value in perpetuating the system but now require service from the system. Until that time, throughout adult life, one's primary identity is that of a producer who willingly focuses above all else on working, consuming, and paying taxes. Any other role the producer has -- parent, spouse, volunteer -- must be secondary to the role of worker/consumer/taxpayer. Naturally, to maintain the level of growth the ruling elite of the culture believe is necessary, a certain level of production/consumption is required. I hasten to add that as I use the word "producer", I'm not referring to producing anything sustainable, but rather the production of whatever is of value to the system which that system compensates in the form of money which then, by way of the system, becomes debt.

Citizens of empire are taught that the total abdication of inner life on behalf of decades of servitude to the needs of the external hierarchical machine is not only normal and natural, but their fundamental duty as human beings. In other words, traversing any other path than this one is synonymous with "failure", "ingratitude", "slothfulness", even "treason." Nowhere is this more exquisitely depicted, in my opinion, than in the recent film "Revolutionary Road" by actors Kate Winslet and Leonardo De Caprio.

Moreover, citizens are constantly rewarded for refusing to question these assumptions. To question would be to demonstrate disturbing symptoms of adulthood. Empire needs infantile servility in order to perpetuate itself indefinitely.

The psyches, then, of empire's citizens are ill-equipped to deal with variation from the system's proscribed roles or functions. Empire, like a "good" parent, gives one everything one "needs" in return for production -- until it doesn't, and when it doesn't, the citizen has no recourse emotionally because he/she has lived in psychological symbiosis with empire

since birth. Does this sound like the relationship between an abuse victim and the abuser?

"I've been used!", cries the abused, having believed that to keep quiet and play by the rules would be better than breaking silence. But we have only to ask the currently unemployed, homeless, foreclosed upon, and bankrupt how well credit scores and paying their bills on time served them.

So now it becomes clearer to us what is happening in the psyches of millions of individuals who are losing their roles in the imperial system -- and in the psyches of those who are not. The entire culture is under unprecedented stress, except perhaps for those old enough to have lived through the Great Depression. On some level, many of them "grew up" and stopped being infants during their ordeal. The 1930s in America was an enormous initiation which they moved through and became wiser and more authentically adult for having done so. This is not to say that every person now alive who lived through the Great Depression is a paragon of wizened maturity, but rather to notice that their survival of it has informed their behavior and attitudes since and actually equipped many of them to face the current crisis more skillfully than younger generations.

As for those in the present moment who have jobs, homes, and health care, they realize on some level how precarious their position is. They have these things now, but it's only a matter of time until they may not. And consciously or unconsciously, this is creating gargantuan levels of stress among "more fortunate" Americans.

But none of this is likely to be new information for those reading this article, and you may be wondering much more about the second half of the title than the first. Before addressing that, however, I believe that it's important to understand that the current epidemic of violence is likely to become far more severe and widespread. Understanding why it's happening is crucial, but if you have a beating heart, you have to be concerned about when and where it's going to erupt next. You also need to understand that as the violence exacerbates, more individuals and groups will be perceived as scapegoats. Currently, in France, CEO's are being taken hostage as they are experienced as the primary culprits of that nation's economic crisis. In the United States, we are likely to see as we did in Binghamton, New York this past week, the targeting of immigrant groups -- even by other immigrants, or just intensifying family or random violence.

Some collapse-aware individuals have chosen to purchase weapons for protection. In a culture gone mad, it's debatable how much protection firearms can actually offer, but if it feels right to do so, in my opinion, one should respect that and act accordingly.

Dialog at this point is still an enormously important option, especially as we interact with folks who've been telling us for years that we are lunatics for preparing for collapse. In fact, the timing couldn't be better for these kinds of conversations, but we need to maintain an innocent, open attitude, not one of "I told you so," as much as some part of us might wish project it.

Equally vital and life-supporting is our involvement in community efforts such as Transition Town and relocalization groups which offer us the opportunity to take local action, develop deep connections, and delight in the healing energy of validation and support from our peers. I believe that as cultural violence spreads in reaction to the trauma of collapse, these groups will be forced to strategize methods for looking out for each other's well being. Dmitry Orlov has a great deal to say about this in Re-Inventing Collapse which I highly recommend reading.

Shamelessly, I must recommend my book Sacred Demise: Walking The Spiritual Path of Industrial Civilization's Collapse which is not primarily a book of information, but contains at the end of nearly every chapter, experiential exercises that both individuals and groups can engage in and which could be very useful in alleviating stress and promoting understanding.

I wrote Sacred Demise specifically to offer the kind of introspection in the face of collapse that is going to be crucial for all of us in order to navigate it emotionally and spiritually. Empire has stolen so much of the inner world from us, and in order to make sense of the turbulent unraveling, we must reclaim our interiority. John Michael Greer brilliantly titled his recent review of my book, "Facing Decline, Facing Ourselves." In truth, we cannot face one without facing the other, for only both in tandem will allow us to navigate the madness.

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See the original essay at
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Further reading:

"Grow Up America - Sept. 11th analyzed in Jungian terms" by Cal Simone, August 2006:

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