

California Burning

by Bill Herbst

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*All the leaves are brown
and the sky is gray
I've been for a walk
on a winter's day
I'd be safe and warm
If I was in L.A.*

*California dreamin'
On such a winter's day*

— "California Dreamin'"
by John and Michelle Phillips
(recorded/released by The Mamas and Papas
on their first album, "If You Can Believe Your Eyes
and Ears" in late 1965; Billboard's #1 single in 1966)

By the time the four singers of *The Mamas and Papas* performed "California Dreamin'" live on the final day of the Monterey Pop Festival in June 1967 during the Summer of Love, the iconic folk-rock/sunshine-pop song had already become an anthem (one of many) for 1960s youth subculture and had catapulted the group to fame. During that halcyon decade in America, California was the Promised Land.

That was then, this is now. California Burning has replaced California Dreaming.

Firefighters describe the current rash of forest fires devastating hundreds of thousands of acres in California and other western states as unlike any they've ever encountered before. These wind-borne fires spread faster, burn hotter, and are more unpredictable and dangerous because of prolonged conditions of drought that have turned entire regions into massive tinder boxes. One spark, and whole forests go up in flames. These conflagrations no longer qualify as "regular" fires that are part of the natural process of ecological renewal; they are now hellish firestorms. Often, the fire is only the first phase of destruction, followed by torrential rains that result in flash flooding and severe mudslides.

Anthropogenic climate change, which is defined as long-term climate disruption caused by human activity, is not a phenomenon that only recently became a focus of scientific study and general concern. We've known for many decades that the factors in human civilization producing dramatic and potentially catastrophic climate change — mainly through the burning of carbon-based fossil fuels to produce energy — were already underway and increasing. Science has studied the subject intensely since the 1960s. The consensus among researchers is overwhelming: accelerating climate change not only threatens modern civilization, but imperils the very survival of our species.

Many reasonable plans have been proposed to reverse the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and thus ameliorate the effects of global warming, but none has been implemented at anything close to the global scale necessary. Despite the fact that 80% of the American public accepts that climate change is real — a view held by the Pentagon as well — a significant percentage of the elites in power in business and government remain unconvinced. The fossil fuel industry and the conservative right, including Christian religious groups, mounted a sustained campaign, actually a movement now decades old, dedicated to the denial of climate change. Nearly a billion dollars is spent every year to lobby the government and convince the public that anthropogenic climate disruption is not real.

Climate change denial is overwhelmingly an American phenomenon. Governments around the world, including such major industrial giants as China, acknowledge the seriousness of rapidly accelerating climate disruption. Time and again, however, when the world unites to address the very real concerns about our environmental future, the United States refuses to join or actively blocks the efforts. Why?

Among the many reasons that some Americans, especially those in positions of wealth and authority, remain stubbornly lost in the deranged and suicidal fantasy of climate change denial, two stand out: *profits* and *politics*, which translate to *money* and *power*. That is sad and may be tragic, but America has always been the Land of Dreams. Some of our dreams cross-fertilize with reality in ways that astonish and inspire (for instance, the dream of sending human beings to the Moon and returning them safely to Earth), while other dreams are toxic to reality and result mainly in suffering. Climate change denial is one of the toxic dreams.

On August 1st, 2018, the New York Times published a special edition of its weekend magazine, devoting the entire issue in print and online to a single article by writer Nathaniel Rich, entitled, "*Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change.*" Rich spent 18 months researching the article and conducting interviews. Essentially an American history of the issue of climate change among environmental scientists, big business, and government policy-makers, the long article (30,000 words) has provoked an outpouring of

immediate response, some pro but more con, among environmental activists and groups.

Rich's thesis is that we could have stopped global warming in its tracks during the 1980s and even came close to doing so, but blew our chance. He blames that failure primarily on "human nature," which is a recurring theme in my own public writing, but tends to let off the hook fossil-fuel companies, other large American corporations, and Republicans in general, all of which bear significant responsibility for our inaction, then and now.

Although I'm pleased to see a flagship of the mainstream media offer a major piece about climate change, a different essay I read recently seems more prescient and timely. The essay is titled, "*Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy*." Its author is Jem Bendell, Professor of Sustainability Leadership and Founding Director of the *Institute for Leadership and Sustainability (IFLAS)* at the University of Cumbria in the United Kingdom.

The paper details the rapidly changing approach to environmental concerns. A shift is already underway among environmental academics from an emphasis on preventing or minimizing the negative effects of climate change by lowering carbon emissions worldwide to include a different and more urgent orientation: study and planning to help localities adapt to the inevitable effects of disrupted climate. Adaptation is quickly becoming the emerging theme. For instance, *sustainability* is giving way to *resilience* in framing discussion.

Professor Bendell is not a dystopian or a doomer. He is well informed, reasonable, levelheaded, and committed to the reduction of harm and needless suffering. Many of his colleagues in the fields of environmental science and sustainability share his views, but most are still reticent to go public with their outlook. (The most well-known climate change whistleblower is Guy McPherson, who catches most of the flak for "negativity.") Over the coming years, that relative silence will no doubt change. I expect that these so far solo voices of warning will grow into a Greek Chorus.

Here's a link to a PDF file version of the paper online that can be read or downloaded for free: <http://www.lifeworth.com/deepadaptation.pdf>

According to Bendell and McPherson (plus others whose names I don't yet know) we have passed the tipping point of environmental calamity. That is the harsh reality of our situation, a conclusion implied by the best, most reliable and sophisticated environmental climate modeling (as well as by the evidence of our senses). In this view, nothing humanity does from this point on — no globally enforced policies to reduce carbon emissions, no pulling back in our energy use; no transition from fossil fuels to clean, renewable energy sources; and no magical technological geoengineering — can prevent disruptive climate change from causing serious and potentially devastating effects on modern civilization.

The feedback loops that produce runaway climate change are already in effect. Polar sea ice will soon be gone, permafrost in the arctic is unfreezing, glaciers are retreating, mountain peaks are bare rather than snow-covered, hurricanes are more severe, and droughts more prolonged, with average global temperatures already more than 1.5° C higher than pre-industrial levels and rising quickly toward 2° and beyond, headed quite possibly toward 5° C. We face unthinkable disasters: drowned coastal cities and massive refugee crises, agricultural failure and subsequent worldwide famines, near-term economic and social collapse, and mass species extinctions (including possibly our own).

Humanity sowed the winds of this catastrophe over the past 200 years through the fossil fuel “bonanza” that powered the massive upscaling of extractive industrial activity and literally created modern society. That has turned out to be a Faustian bargain with unintended consequences. To one degree or another, we’re going to reap the whirlwind. The question is not whether we’re in for a bad time — we are. The question is: *How bad will it be?* Merely inconvenient and uncomfortable? Serious and potentially dire? Or downright fatal?

The future is notoriously unpredictable. Certain elements can be reliably anticipated, but just when we think we know what the future holds and how it will look, reality pulls a fast one and surprises us. All the current visions of our collective future — from optimistic to pessimistic and utopia to dystopia — may turn out to be wrong. That doesn’t mean, however, that we should stick our heads in the sand. Evidence matters, and the evidence is mounting rapidly. Between the camps of those who offer somber warnings about anthropogenic climate change and those who continue to deny the reality and repercussions of that process, I know whom I trust and whom I don’t.

The challenge we face from this point on is not how to *prevent* the negative effects of climate change (the window on that option has closed), but instead how we might *adapt* — collectively and personally — to much harsher conditions.

Throughout the bulk of *homo sapiens* 200,000-year history, *cooperation* (based usually on kinship and the imperatives of small communities) was more in evidence than *competition*. The past 11,000 years of civilization reversed that, promoting selfishness and domination. If the impending changes of climate disruption can be considered to have a silver lining (a stretch, I admit, but I’m looking for something comforting to write here at the end of the commentary), one benefit might be the renewal of cooperation to its more natural and rightful place in human interactions.