

# We're Not There Yet

by Bill Herbst

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One of my favorite principles is *critical mass*. Typically used to define the amount of radioactive material necessary to produce and sustain a reaction in nuclear fission, use of the term has expanded to a myriad of other applications in the natural sciences, in business and finance, in the arts, in social experience, in psychology, in politics, and even in spirituality. Whether occurring in the arena of intentional creativity or processes developing naturally, completely outside the realm of our will, developments involving a mix of elements may lope along for awhile — perhaps for a long time — without much of anything happening. Sometimes, when the mix is inert, nothing ever happens. Other times the combination of ingredients proves volatile and reaches a point of transformation. The mix becomes more than the sum of its parts and pieces, turning into something altogether different. Reality is altered, as is meaning. The result may be exactly what we hoped for or completely unexpected, pleasing or horrific, mild or extreme, calm or explosive. Often, the transformation into something new and different appears with breathtaking suddenness, almost out of the blue.

The “Ah-Ha!” transformation of critical mass can be as mundane as Harvey Firestone’s accidental creation of vulcanized rubber or as profound as Gautama Buddha’s Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. It may occur in very private ways in an individual life or in very public ways in our collective experience.

We speak of “an idea whose time has come.” That’s critical mass.

In early December 2016 — during the initial shockwaves that exploded on the heels of the generally unexpected results in the Presidential election — I wrote and posted a commentary entitled “Banding Together.” I opened the essay with the following statement:

*“This commentary may be premature, perhaps by years. Still, the subject is on my mind, and it’s unquestionably relevant to the times that await us in America and the world.”*

Even then, less than a month after the election of Donald Trump to the White House, everyone could see new handwriting on the wall. Different people saw quite different messages, of course, but nearly everyone saw something. Like many other seminal events in American history — Fort Sumter, Pearl Harbor, 9-11 — Trump’s unlikely victory in November 2016 heralded a major shift in the zeitgeist, a collective surprise of tectonic proportions that no one could minimize

or ignore. In terms of civilizational astrology, the 2016 election was the critical mass expression of the Uranus square Pluto transit that had been cooking — bubbling away in the oven — since the collapse of the toxic-mortgage housing bubble in 2007 and the subsequent financial meltdown of too-big-to-fail investment banks in 2008.

Despite prodigious efforts at restoring normalcy and reestablishing the status quo, the upwelling of various irresistible grass-roots revolutions was underway. Americans' faith in our institutions had been not only shaken, but broken. Shattered. The economic recovery that followed the financial meltdown provided massive benefits for the wealthiest among us and created a burgeoning class of new billionaires, but it left behind fully half of Americans who found themselves clinging precariously to shaky rungs on the bottom half of the economic ladder.

In addition to longstanding conflicts of social class and increasing disparities of economic/financial wealth, many other cracks in the foundation of civilization that had been repeatedly papered over in patchy and temporary repairs resurfaced as dangerous fissures. Throughout the first half of the 2010s, discontent remained largely hidden, but grievance-based anger grew exponentially. Predictions of collective doom, long a staple of the discontented, radical fringe, moved closer to the center of the mainstream.

Given all this, how will our future come to pass?

The default view is that humanity will bumble along pretty much as we have throughout the history of civilization. Incremental shocks will no doubt occur, along with specific disasters and localized tragedies, but, by and large, life will continue, and we'll discover and implement ways to keep moving forward.

That view is held not only by people who think about our collective future, but also by many more people who don't think about it.

On the other hand, a quite different vision of the future is gaining traction. Might it be possible that the entire project of modern civilization has been so ill-conceived and badly built that it could come crashing down in a monumental and catastrophic collapse? Even worse, might reform of the system be a hopeless task or a fool's errand, leaving collapse as our only realistic way of starting over? As unpleasant as those ideas may be, they are views held by an increasing number of people.

A slightly less dystopian perspective is that no significant reforms are likely to be undertaken until humanity is shocked awake by very harsh realities — disasters and/or breakdowns that cannot be ignored. As long as some semblance of normalcy remains, even if only in illusions and false narratives, our collective will won't reach critical mass to fix what is wrong, or, at the very least, to come up with serious changes to the structure of our economics, politics, and the basic

assumptions that are held in society about how we live. The rationale behind this perspective is that human beings generally do not change until forced to do so.

In this view (which I hold), the vexing question becomes: *Just how bad will things have to get before we wake up?* The answer I see is: *Really bad, at the very least a lot worse than things are now. Seriously worse. And even then, no guarantees exist about how we will react to being collectively jolted. We might not awaken into cooperative action, but instead descend into savagery.*

From where we are today, no certainty exists as to how the future will manifest, nor how we might address the looming challenges we face. Critical mass hasn't been reached. We're simply not there yet.

For now, and probably for at least the next couple of years, we are divided, in conflict with ourselves, polarized into warring tribes of Us-versus-Them. Unity is impossible. Appeals to civility and general cooperation fall on deaf ears. No narratives are trustworthy.

And so, we will muddle along, waiting for critical mass.