

TEOLAWKI

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The title of this commentary — TEOLAWKI — is an acronym for the phrase, “**The End of Life as We Know It.**” Many people have never seen or heard the acronym, but it’s already in common usage among a certain segment of the population that’s worried about our collective future.

Modern civilization has already produced TEOLAWKI through numerous, fairly recent industrial and technological innovations — fossil fuels and the internal combustion engine produced the automobile, which arguably changed life irrevocably. The same applies to electricity, the atomic bomb, and the computer revolution that gave us the Internet, wi-fi, and cell phones. So, from a positive or at least neutral perspective, TEOLAWKI could conceivably refer to any developments that change our lives dramatically, whether collectively or individually.

Most often, however, TEOLAWKI is used to mark calamitous disruptions to ordinary life through disasters and catastrophes. Many such events come to mind — some sudden and short, others cumulative and long: the destruction of Pompeii by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D., the Bubonic Plague in Europe during the 14th century, or, more recently, the two World Wars that shaped the 20th century. Each of these profound death experiences was marked by later renewal, so the “end” was also a new beginning.

To a large extent, history is the study of the lessons of Buddhism concerning the impermanence of all things. History researches, studies, and recounts the arising and inevitable passing of different expressions of organized human life over time. TEOLAWKI refers to the moments when such changes manifest — not to any future outcomes, but to the shock of change itself, when life as we knew it falls away.

Much of what we do as individuals and societies is aimed at maximizing the positive expression of TEOLAWKI by making life “better,” while avoiding or staving off the negative manifestations. Ah, but there’s a fly in that ointment. Santayana’s famous aphorism, “*Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it,*” seems all too applicable in most instances. We often fail to see how the seemingly positive expression of TEOLAWKI is intertwined with and leads to its negative expression, and vice versa. What we create and build eventually flips over into destruction and collapse, followed by re-creation in a different form. And so, the Wheel of Samsara turns.

Throughout the vainglorious history of civilization, people have existed who predicted the end — through destruction or collapse, often supposedly imminent — of humanity. Usually, the end was forecast in terms of global disaster, an apocalypse of fire and brimstone. The typical stereotype of a person who believed in that scenario was a grizzled old man who walked the earth in sackcloth and ashes, holding up a sign that proclaimed, "*REPENT! The End is Near.*" Often, these people were religious fanatics obsessed by an Old-Testament-style worldview of righteous cosmic punishment for our collective and personal sins. As individual protestors, they've been routinely dismissed as looney-tunes losers who were bat-shit crazy.

Sometimes those who offered stern warnings about apocalypse found compatriots in belief and formed themselves into informal or organized groups, usually considered cults, that were typically radical and, at times, even violent in their opposition to what they felt to be humanity's folly. On rare occasions the violence took the form of suicidal protest, as occurred with the Jim Jones People's Temple in Guyana in 1978 and Heaven's Gate in southern California in 1997.

Not all such groups or movements are seized by religious fervor, however. A notable example is the Luddite labor movement among English textile workers in the early-19th century, named after its mythical leader, Ned Ludd. Luddites objected to the rapid factory automation underway in England that cost them their livelihoods as hand weavers. For a brief period of two years, the movement attacked and burned factories. Although the uprising was sternly put down by the British Crown and fizzled quickly, the term "Luddite" was later resurrected and incorporated into the common lexicon of the 20th century to mean anyone opposed to technology and progress.

Meanwhile, civilization has continued to unfold in its usual fashion, which is to say, from sublime to ridiculous, from genius to incompetence, from heroic to tragic, and from gently loving to unspeakably cruel, all under the rubric of the maintaining the status quo and conducting business-as-usual. A significant change over the past two centuries has been the unprecedented spike in human population — from one billion in 1800 to 7.5 billion today — as well as the sheer magnitude and unimaginable complexity of industrial/technological activities. Whether we are approaching the limits of growth in the earth's capacity to support us or have already exceeded those limits is a matter of opinion, but anyone who believes that we can continue unlimited growth and expansion needs to have his head examined.

The possibility that we have already exceeded the natural limits of growth — not only the physically environmental, but perhaps also our social and psychological limits as well — has given rise to new categories of "doomers." Some of the people who deliver these more recent and often dire warnings live, as before, on

the fringes of society. A percentage of the new doomers might be termed "survivalists," since they're making plans and investing their time, effort, and money to create ways for themselves and their families to live through what they believe will be the disintegration and collapse of civilization. Reality TV — always on the lookout for subjects that might capture more eyeballs for advertisers — has even embraced survivalists as entertainment.

A larger and more important category of doomers exists, however. Unlike the stereotype of maniacal malcontents and fringe fanatics, this category is composed of thoughtful, educated, and productive people — hundreds of millions of them around the world, and the numbers are expanding rapidly — who come not from the ranks of damaged undesirables, but instead from sectors of society typically considered successful and even privileged. These people include academics, scientists, environmentalists, and social justice activists, as well as many "ordinary" people who embrace common sense. They are concerned in various ways with the roads we've taken collectively in building civilization and the repercussions, often dire in prediction, of where those paths are leading us.

The recent disaster in southeastern Texas is adding fuel to that smoldering fire. The inundation of Houston — fourth largest city in America and the industrial petro-chemical capital of the world — is a telling example of the divergent and conflicting viewpoints that struggle to control the general narrative of what's happening and what it means.

One view holds that natural disasters are an unavoidable occurrence, but that however bad they may be, rebuilding and recovery — while expensive and time-consuming — will be achieved in due course. In this view, Mother Nature's unpredictable risings up are acknowledged but not sufficient reason to change our course in any fundamental way. Reforms in Houston may need to be considered — zoning, bigger flood reservoirs, etc. — but these are safety tweaks that, in the minds of most people, especially those who rule, do not require a significant alteration or reconsideration of America's (and modern civilization's) approach to life. The status quo of business-as-usual will continue to hold sway.

The opposing viewpoint is that we have been warned, yet again, and more emphatically, about the error of our ways and what it portends for the future. In this perspective, Houston may or may not fully recover or return to the previous state of "normalcy," but the question is probably moot, since rebuilding as before is just asking for more of the same — more monster storms, more disasters, and more human suffering. Meanwhile, Irma is now a Category 5 hurricane and poised to follow back-to-back on the heels of Harvey by slamming into Florida. After Irma, Hurricane Jose is waiting in the wings. *[Update on 11 September: Looks like Irma wasn't as bad as it could have been, so Florida is still intact, but the western U.S. is currently ablaze with massive forest fires in California, Oregon, and Washington. Dodge one bullet, get hit by another...]*

While I understand, at least to some extent, the first point of view and the assumptions out of which it emerges, I cannot help but wonder about the people who espouse it. Are they such dutiful and obedient members of the beehive that they believe all the stories they're told? All the various arguments in favor of the viewpoint that we can, will, and should continue as have done in the past boil down finally to a single consideration, the lowest common denominator: *MONEY*. The pursuit of money is both a core reason that things are as they are, and a primary motivation among many for keeping things that way. The presumption seems to be that the creation of material wealth is the greatest possible good — really, the *only* goodness worthy of serious consideration — and that nothing must interfere with that ambition. Yes, many people are good-hearted and caring, and our society routinely pays lip service to helping people, but in fact money is usually the overriding concern.

In America, we have enshrined this assumption through the economic system called "capitalism." Business and commerce are to be allowed free rein to generate wealth, which will end up concentrated in the pockets of the ownership class, but which then will "trickle down" to benefit everyone. A phrase commonly used to justify this scheme is: "*A rising tide lifts all boats.*" Philosophically, capitalism is the somewhat more egalitarian child of the Divine Right of Kings, but rather than using birth as the determining factor for membership at the top of the social pyramid, we've decided that it should be a certain kind of merit (specifically, through success in business and the great material wealth that comes with it) that qualifies one for inclusion in the ruling class.

America has bridged the gap between those two approaches to rulership and pulled them closer together by inheritance within biological families. Blood is thicker than water, as they say, so some children receive the gift of wealth from their parents while others bear the curse of poverty. In the former circumstance, fortunes are amassed and then handed down from one generation to another. I don't mean to suggest that no paradoxes exist in this: Wealth can be crippling to the psyche, but money and class typically outweigh other yardsticks to determine for whom doors of opportunity open in the world and for whom they remain closed. Some people climb out of poverty through gumption and pluck. Most don't.

Almost perversely, America has elevated inherited wealth to the level of dynasty through what amounts to "royal families." The Kennedy and Bush clans are obvious examples. In each case, an aggressive, entrepreneurial capitalist of questionable integrity (Prescott Bush and Joseph P. Kennedy) succeeded in amassing great fortunes that resulted eventually in three American Presidents.

In theory, capitalism is a brilliant economic system. In reality, it's a somewhat different story. Capitalism tends to work best in limited or local economies — such as a village or province — but when cranked up and expanded to

gargantuan levels, such as the world has seen over the past two centuries, the immense and concentrated wealth produced leads to serious trouble.

The desire to maximize profits (and, conversely, to minimize costs) has produced various rationales that are, well, less than ideal in the best cases and often seriously harmful to the greater good.

When money becomes the sole value, then business ceases to be conducted as if it should provide meaningful work for everyone involved. Owners come to regard workers as little more than interchangeable parts required to run their enterprises, just another cost of doing business to be kept as low as possible.

Such dehumanization is contrary to the essential goodness of capitalism (which, in the ideal, is a way to extend the care of families into the larger world). So, workers get short shrift. The labor movements of the early-20th century didn't occur because everyone got a piece of the wealth pie. They happened because workers were badly treated and paid less than living wages. Sadly, the success of the labor movements achieved during and after the Great Depression was largely dismantled later in the century, in part because the "religion" of capitalism created spectacularly effective narratives to defend its own corruption. The falsehoods put forth may have been like putting lipstick on a pig, but they managed to enthrall a large sector of the public.

This is the new "natural order," and efforts on the part of society (usually through government) to more equitably redistribute wealth or to minimize the inevitable human corruption of greed and its tendency to off-load the costs of doing business onto the public are routinely resisted, and typically rejected, as if the refusal to share the wealth were natural and correct.

But this commentary is not a screed against predatory capitalism. All the economic "isms" — capitalism, socialism, communism, etc. — are perfect in theory. Unfortunately, none works very well in the real world. All of them turn out to have feet of clay when put in place by fallible human beings. Any economic system can be corrupted by the dark side of human nature. No, the abuses of capitalism in its present form are just one set of factors among many that comprise the profound difficulties we face as a civilization and a species.

The first rule of holes applies here: *"When you find yourself in a hole and cannot climb out, STOP DIGGING!"* We don't seem able or willing to do that. I'm not sure what the second rule is, but it might be: *"When you find yourself in a hole and cannot climb out, wait for the walls to collapse, then (assuming that you're still alive) do whatever you can to climb out."* Even as we continue to dig ourselves deeper into the hole, the walls are now collapsing. Eventually, that might get our attention, although I'm not sure that anything will straighten us out.

Throughout the television coverage of the storm in Texas, I've noticed that the mainstream media has mentioned almost nothing about the massive monsoon floods in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. That disaster has already killed more than 1,200 people and affected 41 million others. Besides the fact that these are non-Americans who live half a world away, I suppose the absence from the mainstream news goes beyond the fact that those people are darker-skinned foreigners half a world away and may indeed be a function of "disaster-overload." Our collective capacity to bear bad news doesn't extend very far — too much tragedy scares the hell out of people.

Houston is only the current salvo in what will almost certainly be an increasing cascade of natural disasters. Whether this occurs as a series of sporadic, isolated incidents, allowing civilization and humanity to maintain either the present course or something that resembles it, or takes the alternate shape of some momentous, unexpected event that triggers an accelerating wave of collapses, like dominoes being knocked over in quick succession, is open to debate. Either way, the message is clear: *Change*.

Will we get the message? Will we choose to change? On the collective level and among those who make policy, nothing I see makes me think that we have any intention of changing. Or will we be forced to change by repercussions we unleashed but could not control? Perhaps, but that hasn't happened yet. In the worst case, will we destroy ourselves and our world? I don't know.

Despite my doubts and uncertainties, here I am, standing on my little soapbox in the Internet Town Square, holding up a sign. My sign does not say, "*REPENT! The End is Near.*" Instead, my sign says:

"Awaken your Heart. Exercise Compassion."