

Greed Versus the Common Good

Part Two: Reasons for Hope

by Bill Herbst

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[In Part One of this two-part commentary, "Greed Versus the Common Good," I wrote about how we got into this mess. Now, in Part Two, I'll take that further to explore Us versus Them a bit more, followed by a curiously optimistic view of how we might rebound through social change from the toxicity of our own worst impulses.]

The process of greed infiltrating and poisoning America did not occur overnight. It happened gradually, step by step, over many decades, like a degenerative illness, slowly but progressively worsening, so that the patient never quite noticed the increasing disability, even after the disease had taken over.

If greed has won, is generosity dead? No, not at all. Human beings are routinely capable of great generosity toward others. The rub, however, is that we tend to be generous toward others we identify as members of our "In-group" — in other words, "Us." We are likely, however, to be conspicuously less generous toward those we see as members of an "Out-group," or "Them."

Neuroscience has identified the amygdala as the primary region of the brain where the "Us-Them" phenomenon occurs, and the process of distinction is immediate, pre-cognitive, and automatic. We typically see "Them" in three main ways: first, as threatening and angry; second, as disgusting and repellent; and third, as primitive and undifferentiated. Our reactions are fear, revulsion, and superiority. By contrast, those we see as "Us" are regarded in the opposite ways, as trustworthy and happy, likeable and attractive, evolved and individuated.

Beyond brain chemistry, social conditioning plays a major role as well. We are innately (biologically) less generous to others we see as Them, but social reinforcement may push that lack of generosity further, approving attitudes that are stingy, unkind, and even downright malevolent. In the extremes of war, enemies (Them) are frequently characterized as evil — sub-human vermin who deserve no compassion and must be exterminated. Killing other people is easier if they are not seen as people.

Such propaganda succeeds all too effectively. Examples abound. Consider the Rwandan genocide in 1994 that pitted the Hutu against the Tutsi, two ethnic tribes that an outside observer couldn't tell apart. Discord and even hatred

between the two groups had simmered in Rwanda for decades. Four years after a civil war began, and following the assassination of the Rwandan president and subsequent collapse of the government, that hatred exploded into unimaginable violence. The scale of the murderous rampage was mind-boggling: Over a mere three months, *800,000* people were slaughtered — most of them Tutsis murdered by Hutus — in a savage nightmare of wanton mass killing, most of which was done hand-to-hand, close up and personal, by Hutus wielding machetes and clubs.

I don't mean to suggest that human beings are despicable. We are capable of the entire panorama of behaviors, from amazing kindness and loving concern to cold cruelty and terrible violence. The critical implication here is that we are vulnerable to social manipulation that can alter our beliefs and behaviors toward either direction — inclusion or rejection of others — and also that our most loving potentials are reserved for those we regard as like ourselves — "Us."

If "Us" includes only the people in our family or personal circle of friendships (and "Them" is therefore everyone else we don't know, and about whom we don't care), that defines very tight limits on our sense of civic responsibilities and social obligations to others. Take good care of your beloveds, family, and friends, but screw everyone else. If, on the other hand, "Us" includes all sentient beings in the universe, then collective responsibility of a very different magnitude is invoked.

Determining how freely we can pursue personal gain through material wealth is easy in the first example. Pretty much anything goes, as long as we consider or take care of the small group of people we like or love. In the second example, the almost unlimited sense of responsibility makes the situation infinitely more complicated, since it reduces the options dramatically for seeking personal gain. Right action and doing no harm become so daunting and complex that pursuit of material wealth can occur only within the strictest parameters of caution.

The basic problem (and challenge) of Us versus Them is one of proportion. How do we increase our perception and feeling for others as Us and reduce the numbers we identify as Them? If we're talking about an antidote to greed, then more of Us and fewer of Them is definitely the right direction.

What do we need to achieve such a change in our social condition? First off, allow me to acknowledge that hope is different than optimism. Optimism is a temperamental attitude to look on the bright side that shapes beliefs and expectations. Hope is more of a pure wish for life to be better. I'm not optimistic about humanity's future, but I do feel some hope. Human beings created civilization, and human beings can change it.

Two possibilities give me hope.

The first is already happening. Here in the waning years of the Uranus-Pluto period, we're already witnessing a powerful grass-roots movement of young Centennials demanding legislative change to address gun violence in America — and, against all odds, making real progress. Perhaps the old folks just need to get the hell out of the way.

If an evolving social antidote to greed is to arise, I think it likely that the youngest generations will carry the load. Not to excoriate aging Baby Boomers and mid-life Gen-Xers, but both those generations have largely capitulated to the acceptance of greed. As well-meaning as many individuals in those generations are, overall both older cohorts have become part of the problem more than part of the solution. No, if anyone will stand up to take back the country and heal the cancers that are devouring America's heart, that task appears to fall squarely on the shoulders of the Millennials now in young adulthood and Centennials currently in childhood and adolescence. Perhaps they'll get an assist from the next generation in the 2020s and 2030s, as-yet-unborn and so far unnamed.

Every generation has its day in the sun to rise to the occasion of whatever challenges history throws at it. The Millennials and Centennials too will get their hour on the stage. Both these younger generations are more team players than either Boomers or Gen-Xers. They are also pragmatic and practical about the world. The Centennials especially are more savvy than any previous generation at their age about how to develop and use power collectively. They've already mastered social media and the necessity of mass organization to achieve clear, specific, goal-oriented changes. That is critical to successfully challenge an entrenched, powerful, and utterly resistant status quo. Vague appeals to making things better won't cut it, and these kids know that.

It's not that I believe Millennials or Centennials to be immune from greed or any of the other ailments that beset us. And, of course, young people are typically impatient and want change NOW. (That may turn out to be an advantage, however, given the dire crises humanity will almost certainly confront over the coming years.) What both younger generations seem to have in abundance is a better understanding than their elders of the importance of relatedness among their own members — literally, a sense of collectivity — to balance and harmonize individuality and separateness. And that's precisely what the common good requires.

In my admittedly limited understanding of hopeful possibilities, I'm willing to place my bet on these younger generations that are coming of age. The old folks may provide some guidance and perspective, but the young ones will have to do most of the heavy lifting throughout the remainder of their lives.

Other developments — either possible or probable — fall into the "*ill-wind-that-blows-no-good*" category. That's less positive, of course, but hope sometimes

emerges even from conditions that are negative. Awakening often requires a jolt, and numerous possibilities are already queued up, waiting to smack us hard.

With regard to greed, we'll probably need a serious challenge that affects almost everyone, but of a kind very different from an event like 9-11, which temporarily unified "Us," but also dramatically expanded "Them," and resulted in actual wars that are still ongoing tragedies. We need something very different from that, something that awakens and expands Us, but has no Them — something either literally or metaphorically akin to the Great Depression. And that could happen as early as the 2020s, but certainly before mid-century. A severe and prolonged economic contraction, presumably on a global scale, is damn near inevitable.

While many factors give pause about the future of the global economy (most obviously financial shenanigans), the most obvious culprit for derailing the infinite-growth approach to industry and commerce is *EROEI* (the acronym for "Energy Return on Energy Invested"). We are now well into the phase of rapidly dwindling profitability for fossil fuels. The problem is not that crude oil is running out, but rather that the cost of extracting it is becoming increasingly prohibitive. The astonishing economic boom of the past two centuries was built on cheap, easily accessible energy, and those days are coming to an end. Sadly, alternative energy sources do not offer the huge quantity of energy our economy demands, nor are they sufficiently inexpensive (and unlikely to become so anytime soon) to offer a viable replacement for fossil fuels.

I'm not predicting an apocalyptic economic collapse. Nothing so overwhelming would be required. The global economy is more fragile than commonly believed, however, and any number of even relatively minor factors could cause cracks that widen into a system-wide breakdown, with the ripples outward wreaking havoc around the world. Financial markets and supply chains could be disrupted. Currencies could go belly up. The day-to-day business of mass commerce could take a serious hit, and billions of human lives would be affected very quickly.

Look, I know that sounds awful, and I don't lobby for any additional human suffering. Life in bodies provokes more than enough grief without longing for more. I'm not Cotton Mather shrieking fire and brimstone sermons about the necessity for moral punishment. I certainly don't cheerlead for nuclear catastrophe or environmental disaster, and I hope humanity can avoid those devastating cataclysms, either of which could extinct our species and force a long-term restart for the entire biosphere. But, in terms of the subject of this commentary (greed versus the common good), something less apocalyptic — such as a serious and sustained economic contraction — might actually turn out to be a good thing. Implicit in the onslaught of greed and what it produces are the seeds of its own destruction. Those seeds are already planted and growing. Sooner or later, predatory capitalism is headed over a cliff.

America is now the subject of many dystopian visions. And why not? Some people who worry about our future feel that Americans are so entranced by and addicted to the toys of consumerism that we are woefully unprepared psychologically and communally for a serious economic collapse. When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1989, the Russian people were already so accustomed to deprivation that they were hardy survivors. They had long practiced dogged perseverance in the face of totalitarian rule, and they survived again. Not likely in America, or so say the doomers.

The pessimistic predictions about what will happen in this country if we are subjected to harsh financial or economic limitations include chaos, social anarchy, and wholesale violence, perhaps followed by civil war and/or authoritarian lockdown via martial law. While I admit that such outcomes are possible, I disagree that they are inevitable. Numerous academic studies about human reactions to terrible disasters show only a modest amount of dog-eat-dog behavior, and a much more pronounced tendency for people to band together in acting for the common good. Social cooperation is boosted in times of serious collective troubles. If an economic downturn were not a sudden collapse, but instead a gradual series of incremental breakdowns, would generosity be as likely? I don't know. I suspect that levels of collective fear would influence whether hearts open or close.

If the drug we've been mainlining with greed produces a kind of craven addiction to buying stuff we want but don't really need, hundreds of millions of Americans finding themselves forced to go cold turkey would no doubt be upsetting. Shock, grief, and anger would all be predictable reactions. So, I wouldn't rule out an initial period of chaos that might be severe. But we are a brilliantly adaptable species with the ability to change as required. If the banks close and the money becomes worthless, people will create new ways to obtain the goods and services they need — barter, black markets, cooperative exchanges, old-fashioned sharing. If the grocery stores are empty, people will create new ways to get food — gardens, locally supported farming networks. If the electrical grid goes down and the virtual reality of faux communities on the Internet vanishes, people will return to candles and actual social contact — literally spending time with others. No, that wouldn't be easy, especially in the early stages, and there would no doubt be casualties, particularly among the old and infirm. But most people will make the transition. Life will go on.

America may have lost its soul, but the spirit of inclusion through love and generosity still resides within the people, waiting to be rediscovered and renewed. One way or another, we will probably get that chance. I don't know if we have any realistic shot at saving ourselves, but I'd like to see us try.

As always, I'm aware that I could be wrong about any or all of this.