

astrological-cultural-spiritual-political
views & commentary...

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THE HERBST NEWSLETTER



Thoughts, dates, & reminders about our lives as members of the craziest species on this lovely planet. Like a message in a bottle washing up on the sandy shores of consciousness...

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Dear friends,

This month's commentary takes a somewhat longer view than usual, looking at the meaning for humanity of the upcoming decade in light of both our ancient past and the corresponding challenges we may face over the next two centuries.

—Bill Herbst

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLUMBING

In the hierarchy of human needs, notions such as freedom, independence, and democracy are lovely concepts, but they are way down the list in significance. Those lofty abstractions can't hold a candle to plumbing. That's what really is the bottom line: *Plumbing*.

When I use the term "plumbing," I'm not talking about fancy bath fixtures. I'm referring to the infrastructure of waste management. Plumbing—in the particular way I mean it here—concerns the recycling of apparent waste products of life and their efficient return to the well of resources.

A significant part of the brilliance of nature on earth is her mastery of plumbing. Everything that lives and exists will eventually die, break down, or pass away in destruction, and natural selection has worked out ways to return everything that's used up, broken, or dead back into the bucket of raw materials from which more and abundant new life springs forth. Earth's recycling biosystems are astonishing in their complexity and stunning in their efficiency. Nature's seeming wisdom in this is far beyond anything human beings have ever created. The best we can hope to achieve is a pale imitation of natural systems. We're still learning that hard truth, however, and we've come to a tipping point, a crossroads of monumental proportions.

During most of the past two million years of hominid evolution in higher primates, we were simply part of nature's plumbing, just another species in the extraordinary chain of interdependence, where everything eats everything else. Then, with the appearance of *homo sapiens sapiens* (that's *us*, friends) about 50,000 years ago, a change was set into motion. Human beings used our big brains and cleverness to find ways to separate our lives from the natural environment. In effect, we have devoted ourselves to the creation of artificial

environments that are to one degree or another divorced from natural biosystems, even as we continue to rely on the bounty those systems provide.

Over the most recent epoch in our brief history, two developments occurred that stand out boldly in the larger scheme of things, two revolutions that changed nearly everything about the human condition and our relation to nature. The first revolution took hold roughly 10,000 years ago (give or take a millennia or two) in agriculture, when we stopped living as small bands of mobile hunter-foragers and settled into locality-based cultivation of crops (monoculture) and domestication of animals (as food sources). Though some plant and numerous animal species have tricks or adaptations to attract or concentrate their food sources, no other species we know of has ever created anything like the revolution of human agriculture, which was so radical that it caused a breach in our connection to the natural world. No longer were we integrated into the interwoven ecology around us; agriculture allowed us to stand atop nature and force her, at least to some extent, to do our bidding. Civilization as we know it emerged initially out of this first revolution, along with ownership, money, hierarchical domination (slavery), empire, and war.

On the surface, our divorce from nature through agriculture was a huge success for humanity. In skimming off the cream of nature's bounty, we moved from temporary encampments to permanent villages, then into larger towns and cities. As density increased in living arrangements, so did the overall population, which began to double and redouble more quickly, although much time passed before that exponential curve would spike upwards dramatically.

The nearly vertical spike in population occurred very recently, during the second of the two profound revolutions. Agriculture may have set us on the road toward separation from nature, but the Industrial Revolution of the 19th-20th centuries was (almost literally) like pouring gasoline on the fire. Mechanization allowed a dramatic increase of land under cultivation, and the unexpected bounty of oil-derived chemistry let us squeeze out ever-higher crop yields per acre.

The steel plow broke the crust of American prairies, then the added fertilizers and pesticides streamlined the ease with which farmers could convert the diversified biosystems of grasslands into monoculture cropland, resulting in the fabled "amber waves of grain from sea to shining sea." The breadbasket of America fed the world, at least for a brief period.

Viewed from a short-term perspective, this was fabulous! More food, more markets, more calories per capita. Wealth, longevity, the cornucopia of delights. More grain meant more cows, more hogs, more chickens—pre-digested protein. Industrial technology revolutionized fishing, and the oceans were scoured for their harvest. For industrialized first-world nations, the second half of the 20th century was the feast to end all feasts. We gorged ourselves at the table. Consumer technology meant an end to canning and root cellars. Now we could just motor down to the grocery store and stock our freezers for the winter. Globalization brought food from every region of the globe. Seasons vanished. No more waiting for late-summer tomatoes, and we get plums from Peru in the dead of winter. Is this fantastic or what?

Well, it *is* fantastic (as in fantasy-based—which seem to be the only pursuits American society cares about), but the "*or what?*" is the problem. In our mad rush to tame or conquer nature, we have succeeded in fouling our own nest. What is considered agriculturally "more efficient" in human terms is shockingly inefficient, disturbing, and increasingly destructive to the earth's plumbing systems. 25,000 years of amassed wisdom about how to find or grow food in harmony with nature have been forgotten or intentionally discarded by industrial societies with mass economies. To make matters worse, we are fast approaching the outer limits and dramatic downturn of supposedly "high-yield" industrial farming.

For anyone interested in understanding the difference between truly sustainable farming and destructive monoculture, I highly recommend a small book, "The One-Straw Revolution," by the Japanese farmer Masanobu Fukuoka. This classic from the 1970s combines common-sense reverence with technical prowess in learning how nature works, and how we can emulate her ways in farming to our mutual benefit. Fukuoka's method is not merely "organic farming" without chemical pesticides, but with no tilling or fertilizers as well. High yields are achieved using less human or mechanical labor and without any erosion or exhaustion of fertility by returning to the earth all we take from it, protecting and conserving the soil and watersheds below by continual ground cover and mulch, thus keeping the land alive and vibrant. In a sane world, this is how we would feed ourselves.

Extractive Economies

Both agriculture and industry are practiced in contemporary society as “extractive economies.” Nature distributes her resources. She uses her plumbing systems of recycling waste to spread out the various elements, thus diluting their toxicity while reintegrating them into the life-enhancing stream. Modern agriculture and industry *extract* from the earth only those elements that humans consider useful to our endeavors, concentrating them by filtering out whatever we regard as “useless” to our immediate concerns.

Timber companies may replant after clear-cutting, but they cannot replace old-growth tropical and boreal forests, which are complex ecosystems essential to the renewal of life. Dams designed to “tame” rivers destroy the habitat of wild salmon, and the oceans have been dangerously overfished. Soil erosion, watershed depletion, and global desertification from extractive farming are now staggering abuses. Even the birds and the bees are vanishing. The growing list of interwoven repercussions from accelerating ecological devastation is breathtaking. In so many ways, we humans ignore and upset the balance of nature for short-term benefit or profit. This results in desolation and the reintroduction of toxicity into the world.

Consider mining. The extraction of minerals involves digging up massive amounts of earth, then using huge quantities of water and chemicals to leech out what we want from the removed substrate. For instance, arsenic is commonly used in a water bath to separate gold, silver, copper and other “precious metals.” The waste water runoff from these operations contains concentrated toxins that seep into the ground itself and down to the watersheds deep below.

Near Butte, Montana, what is called the Berkeley Pit was once the largest truck-operated open-pit copper mine in the U.S. Mining companies dug up one billion tons of earth, from which they extracted copper and some silver. Runoff from the chemical leaching process has now formed a huge lake of highly acidic water, laced with toxins such as arsenic and cyanide. Thousands of birds are killed every year by simply landing in the lake or sipping the poisonous water. (Mining companies insist that the birds die because of “bad diets.”) The entire area in and around Butte is now considered by environmentalists to be one of the most toxic sites in America.

This is what extractive economies do. Agriculture and industry squeeze out from the earth whatever particular resources they seek, usually through the addition of intensive chemical toxins (fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides, arsenic baths, etc.), to produce their concentrated products (food and minerals). They destroy the soil, pollute the groundwater, disrupt the eco-balance, and endanger us all so that some can profit financially. In the 14th century, with hand-tilling of fields, limited mining, and a total human population of only 300 million, this was not an urgent problem. Nature could still absorb our disruptions and heal the wounds to her plumbing systems. Today, with industrial farming, mechanized mining on a massive scale, and 6.6 billion human beings, we have overwhelmed nature’s ability to absorb the damage to her systems of life-renewal. The plumbing is not only clogged, but broken.

As with so many human endeavors, a little bit of agriculture is brilliant; too much of it is downright stupid. The scale of our endeavors makes all the difference in meaning and consequence. 10,000 years ago, no one considered that agriculture could eventually backfire on humanity by exhausting and polluting the earth. Even 200 years ago, such an outcome was inconceivable. Not so today. Now the handwriting is on the wall, in big, bold letters, although you’d be hard-pressed to know that by looking at how we continue to conduct business. The inextricable linkage of modern agriculture to economics, finances, commercial markets, and the whole complex of our social structures and institutions makes us not only resistant to change, but nearly blind to its urgent necessity. Financial Capital is pursued as a single-minded obsession. Living Capital is only an afterthought, if thought of at all.

Can the juggernaut be stopped before we plunge over into the abyss? Probably not. This does not mean that “the end is nigh,” however. Instead, it implies that the systems in place have to break down before they can be meaningfully rebuilt. Despite talk of “greener” agriculture in the corporate marketplace, progressive reforms are very unlikely. As long as no serious disruptions occur in commerce and corporate profits, changes will be piecemeal—more public relations image-management than any substantial revision of business-as-usual. What will foment the coming revolution is economic and institutional collapse, brought about by a diverse set of triggers that cumulatively push us to critical mass.

Though one need not believe in or study astrology to see it, this *is* what Civilizational Astrology tells us. The coming alignment of Uranus in Aries reaching first-quarter square to Pluto in Capricorn over the next 15 years lays out in no uncertain terms the inevitability of institutional collapse, with both implosions and explosions in economics and finance. This revisitation of outer-planet archetypes that aligned during the Great Depression of the 1930s and again during challenges to the cultural status quo in the 1960s occurs next in the 2010s. We have been gorging ourselves at the table and squabbling over who gets the biggest dessert, but we're about to get a rude awakening from the kitchen.

Unfortunately, conflicts will intensify over the remaining food at our dwindling banquet. The wars and pogroms of the 20th century—despite their seeming rationales in religion or social ideologies—were finally about power and control in how the economic pie is sliced. Those geopolitical games are still with us—in some ways more now than ever before, given peak oil and the long slide into energy scarcity. Wars of empire are already ongoing, and further resource wars could easily be among the triggers provoking collapse.

Collectively, we behave as if no crisis were imminent. And yet, hundreds of millions of individuals are all too aware of the dangerous waterfall at the end of these rapids. The bad news is that we are headed over those falls. All the canoes are tied together, and the cascade of big canoes (governmental, corporate, and institutional) that go over the falls first to crash on the rocks below will pull on the flotilla of smaller skiffs behind (communities, families, and individuals), lurching them suddenly toward the edge. The good news is that many of these small boats will cut loose and paddle toward shore before being swept over into disaster.

That visual metaphor is simplistic, of course, and gives little true indication of the extraordinary ripple effects of financial meltdown or social collapse. Every imaginable repercussion will probably occur, from hysterical attempts at lock-down by authorities to maintain control or restore order (which are unlikely to succeed, in my opinion), to heroic acts and noble sacrifice on the part of individuals. Great disasters do indeed bring out the best and worst in human nature. Somewhere between those extremes lies a middle ground of shared work in restructuring commerce to keep the world turning.

So, we are approaching a decade of shock and awakening from our blissful reverie. We're about to get jolted with a 40,000-volt cattle prod of our own making. The decade of the 2010s will unfold as another lightning-bolt chapter in the recently accelerated evolution of humanity toward substantive change in how we live, work, and play on this garden planet.

Beyond that, however, in the longer view, where is humanity headed over the next 200 years? How will we alter the ways we structure society and business? Can we achieve a general reverence for nature that has so far been felt passionately and pragmatically only by a select minority throughout prior human history? Can we dodge the bullet of the gun we've made and aimed at our own heads? Might we gentle our adolescent aggression, give up our longstanding ways of dominance and submission, extend our vision beyond the short-term, and find better means to reconcile group conformity and rugged individuality, the need to belong versus the desire to stand apart?

We have a lot to learn about plumbing, and precious little time to do so. One facet of that remedial education will be the reform of extractive economies into renewing economies. We will soon assess profits and costs very differently than we do now—through the redefinition of both collective responsibility and personal freedom. That will require all the maturity and wisdom we can muster.



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