
THE HERBST NEWSLETTER

astrological-cultural-spiritual-political views & opinions

--- Thoughts, dates, and 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 is one of a number of newsletters I hope to write about the core problems of what ails humanity. There's no schedule or order for these, for all our glitches interact to create the current predicament in which we find ourselves. Each dilemma takes on some of the qualities of the others, which is part of why solutions are so hard to come by. For me, however, this first misunderstanding lies at the heart of our difficulties.

--Bill Herbst

Commentary: **Possession and Ownership**

"Imagine"

by John Lennon

*Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today...*

*Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...*

*You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one*

*Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can*

*No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...*

*You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one*

"*Imagine*" by John Lennon is generally considered one of the most influential popular songs ever written. It routinely appears among the top rankings on lists of Greatest-Songs-of-All-Time, as polled by various musical organizations and memberships. *Rolling Stone Magazine* judged "*Imagine*" to be the third best rock and roll song of all time, behind Bob Dylan's "*Like a Rolling Stone*," and the Rolling Stone's "*(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction*," which is also probably the most Rolling Stones we could logically pack into a single sentence.

Lennon himself asserted in an interview late in his life that "Imagine" was as good as anything he had written with the Beatles. High praise indeed from the author.

Part of what made the Beatles so important was that they began as working-class stiffos from Liverpool who lived the low life as denizens of Hamburg's early-'60s bar scene, but then at precisely the right cosmic moment were transformed into clean-cut moppets and thrust upon Ed Sullivan's television stage wanting to hold your hand (yeah yeah yeah). Once picked out by fate for the glories and torments of fame, the Beatles became bona fide representatives for the Boomer Generation during the electric awakening of the Uranus-Pluto 1960s.

They rode into the revolution of sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll at the head of our charging column, clearing the way, as it were. They came of age with us, or, more truly, just ahead of us, in the process evolving musically from writing cute Top 40 ditties for adolescent teeny-boppers to the creation of an impressively mature and sophisticated musical repertoire containing both substance and subtlety. And the Beatles achieved this maturation over an amazingly short span of time, less than seven years — from 1964 to 1971. Then they went their separate ways, to follow more individual destinies.

By the time of their inevitable breakup (no band could long survive the pressures of the fishbowl life the Beatles lived), John Lennon had moved from earlier concerns about relationships and family ("*Norwegian Wood*," "*In My Life*," "*You Got to Hide Your Love Away*" "*Come Together*," "*Mother*," et al) to broader concerns for humanity as a whole ("*Imagine*," "*Give Peace a Chance*," etc.).

Lennon had already ended his first marriage in favor of new partner Yoko Ono, who would enable him to safely go through his dark night of the soul by grappling with inner demons concerning gender identity and parenting roles. Yoko certainly played a caustic part in the Beatles breakup, but she also gave John a son, and the five years Lennon spent as a full-time householding husband

and devoted parent let him achieve at last his own spiritual mountaintop and the inner peace for which he yearned.

As the opening and title track from Lennon's 1971 solo album of the same name, "*Imagine*" identifies three possibilities for us to envision, presumably to improve the civilized world of collective humanity: life without religion, life without nationalism, and life without ownership.

In the song's first stanza, Lennon takes aim at the religious notion that earthly life is merely an illusion, a game conducted to test our moral mettle. How would our lives change here-and-now if there were no Judgment Day and no resulting lofty reward (heaven) or terrifying punishment (hell).

*Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today...*

To Lennon, this possibility is still accessible, because his second line states: "It's easy if you try..." Despite the seemingly fierce hold of religion over the affairs of humankind, Lennon feels that a better alternative beckons.

In the second stanza, Lennon turns his attention to the borders of race and place that separate humankind into different nationalities. What if our racial, geographic, and cultural differences are finally artificial and could be shucked like old, worn-out skins?

*Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...*

Even after thousands of years of racial hatred and state-sponsored warfare, does humanity still long for peace? Can we even conceive of life without violence and killing? The second line of this stanza affirms that Lennon certainly does. Imagining no countries "isn't hard to do..."

Both these first two possibilities for a better world are affirmed in the chorus. The world may never literally become one, but in Lennon's view the world can be *as one*:

*You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one*

Can we transcend our differences of religion, race, creed, and the dividing allegiances of locality and culture to finally live as one? Lennon knows this to be a tall order, but he has confidence that it will eventually come to pass.

Then comes the third stanza, where Lennon addresses the issues of ownership and personal property, and, by implication, the complexities of commerce, money, and economics:

*Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...*

Ah, finally we reach the heart of the matter: Imagine no possessions. No reason for greed. No hunger. A real sharing of the world. All of it, not just tiny bits of it.

But here, unlike in the previous two stanzas about envisioning a world devoid of religion or country, Lennon's confidence in the creativity of his audience falters. Imagining no religion is "easy if you try." Imagining no countries "isn't hard to do." But no possessions? No ownership? No carving up the world and haggling over what's "yours" versus what's "mine?" No "Keep Out!" and "No Trespassing!" signs to prevent others from treading on land you claim to own? No elaborate fortress compounds ringed with fences and armed guards to keep out those who want what you have? No bank vaults or security guards or property lawyers or patent/copyright lawsuits? Well, imagining all that turns out to be a horse of an entirely different color.

Lennon's comment is telling: "I wonder if you can..." He knows all too well how deeply imprinted human beings are on ownership and our identification with personal property. These values are interwoven into nearly every aspect of social exchange and commercial markets. They are like the water around the fish, the ether of civilization.

In the mythology of Adam and Eve in Eden, Christianity would have us believe that the Original Sin was biting from the apple of knowledge. In more esoteric versions of the story, knowledge meant awareness, as in consciousness itself. Setting down the road of acquiring knowledge was less a sin than a prime mover in life's fantastic journey toward transcendent consciousness.

If we're really talking about *sin*, however — as in *a violation of how things are meant to be* — I would nominate ownership and possession as far better candidates for that original cosmic crime.

But Bill, isn't territoriality one of the precursors to ownership and possession? Many species high up the evolutionary chain are territorial in their behaviors, which is a significant piece of our genetic heritage. That must be natural and lawful, right? So, if territoriality is OK, what's wrong with ownership and possession?

Ah yes, territoriality. The tendency of certain animals to define an area of turf as "their" physical region for hunting food, which they then patrol to keep out intruders, which always means others of the same species. This is Nature's way

of balancing the food supply of predators with prey. If two wolves hunt the same territory, both might starve. The stronger of the two wolves forcing the weaker wolf to hunt elsewhere increases the likelihood that at least one wolf will live to propagate, thus enhancing the odds of the species' continued survival.

Well, that's close, but wins no cigar as a justification for ownership. Numerous factors keep territoriality from becoming possession and ownership, among them vacancy and usage limits. When an animal vacates its territory for any reason, it gives up that turf. Territory is based on here-and-now presence. Not so with possessions and ownership, which allow human beings control while present, while vacant (rental property landlords, to give one example), and even *after* death (through wills and legacies).

Second is usage limits. Animals "claim" only what they use. In nature's genetic scheme, territory is not amassed for its own sake or for future purposes. No animal would consider defending more territory than necessary. A wolf does not pick a turf, then attach an adjacent turf to it for the purpose of holding that enlarged territory for the wolf's future sons-to-be. Human beings routinely amass as much as they can through ownership and possession, to the point of empire. No limits constrain the human drive toward acquisition of property, which, when excessive, is called greed. And yet, greed is encouraged and enshrined in our contemporary economies, based as they are on unending, limitless growth. Enterprises of gargantuan scale are seen as great successes, rather than as the perverse aberrations they truly are. Bigness becomes a goal to be sought rather than a dead end to be avoided.

Various elements of human ownership are particularly galling. One appalling practice is the ownership of other human beings in slavery, which has only recently been legally abolished by civilization, but which flourished for thousands of years. Another insult is the tendency to regard earth and sky as inert, mere lifeless resources to be plundered for extractive purposes. Everything is commoditized, for sale, and valued only for its most immediate, obvious, or utilitarian use, and then only as those uses are clearly human. All other considerations are dismissed out of hand. Such a narrow cosmology disrespects life and holds no reverence at all for the amazing worlds of which we are a part.

Organized religion has played a role in this travesty, by encouraging people to believe that humans hold dominion over all other living creatures, as well as the earth and sky. Agriculture is even more culpable, since hunter-gatherer societies had no need for ownership. Only with cultivation of crops through farming did ownership become attractive. Whoever controlled (possessed/owned) the land controlled the food supply, and therein lay personal wealth and social power. So we carved up the land into parcels, decreeing that it "belonged" to us. Finders keepers. That started 11,000 years ago. Now, nearly all the land on the earth is owned by a tiny percentage of individuals or states. We have made possession and ownership the cornerstones of our legal, social, and economic systems. We have extracted unimaginable wealth for the few who own, but caused endless suffering to the many who toil. And we are headed right over a cliff.

In childhood development, the onset of the possessive phase begins about the age of 20-24 months and lasts for about a year. That's when our identities as

selves begin to extend beyond our bodies and outward into the environment. We begin to play with control and ownership of whatever we can find, grab, and hold. This phase has come to be called **The Terrible Twos**, and their hallmark is the same as the title of another famous Beatles' song, George Harrison's "I Me Mine." As the ego kicks into hyper self-interest, the primitive drive for domination is expressed with urgency, intensity, and often tyranny. Only after this phase cools and passes do the more social values of cooperation and sharing emerge some years later.

Most parents are relieved at the passing of their young ones' Terrible Twos, since children are often distinctly unlovable during that difficult period. And yet, a profound disconnect exists between family and society: what we acknowledge in families as a necessary evil and temporary condition of disturbed development in childhood has been codified into society, culture, and civilization as the crown of creation and pinnacle of achievement for mature adults. For reasons I cannot conceive, we extol the supposedly sterling virtues of aggression, competition, and selfishness, as if they represented wonderful attributes of mature grown-ups.

Put in simple terms, as a civilization we are stuck in The Terrible Twos. We not only allow but encourage immature though chronologically adult humans who are caught in such personality disturbances to wreak havoc — on our human families, our societies, our life-support systems, myriad other living species, and the earth herself. Our current corporate culture is a breeding ground for such immaturity, from the mail room to the board room. And though I don't wish to impugn everyone who works in a corporation, the problem is pandemic, since maximizing profits at any cost is now the mantra of contemporary business.

I wish I had a graceful, easy solution to this dilemma to offer. Sadly, I don't. Even conceiving what life might look like without our current schemes of ownership and possession is unclear to my imagination. Apparently, I am too much a product of my time in history. But then, few examples exist in history, no more than some 19th and 20th century utopian communes and small South Pacific Island tribes, all of which are now long gone. I really don't know what life would look like with ownership reformed and possession limited.

I can, however, assert with some conviction that over the next two to three centuries, human beings will either evolve pragmatically workable solutions to the vexing excesses and imbalances of ownership and possession or lose our perch at the top of the food chain. We will find and create more graceful and reverent ways to live together on this garden planet in some sort of harmony, or we will be relegated to the evolutionary trash heap of failed experiments.

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