

Chicken Little or Cassandra?

by Bill Herbst

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The folk tale of Henny Penny, commonly known in the U.S. as Chicken Little (or sometimes Chicken Licken), is a story or fable about a young chick who misinterprets reality. When an acorn falls from an oak tree onto its head, Chicken Little assumes that “the sky is falling” and freaks out. The chick sets out on a journey with the purpose of warning the King of the realm about the impending disaster.

Various versions of the fable progress through the storytelling to different conclusions. In one version, Chicken Little and the other animals it meets along the journey are all eventually eaten by a fox. In that version, the moral is not to be taken in by falsehoods: Don’t believe everything you assume or are told. In another telling, Chicken Little is rescued and doesn’t end up as dinner for the fox. In that and other “happy ending” versions of the tale, the moral is to have courage.

Many similar fables have been told for millennia. Most of them refer to a false belief in a supposedly imminent apocalypse — the ending of the world (which does not occur). The protagonist in each fable is fooled into believing that the world is coming to an end and acts as a false prophet, sowing the seed of panic and hysteria.

Next, consider the tale from Greek mythology of Cassandra, also known as Alexandra, who was the beautiful daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy. The Greek god Apollo courted Cassandra and bestowed upon her the gift of prophecy. Cassandra spurned Apollo’s advances, however, so he cursed her by putting a bizarre twist onto the “gift” of prophecy: Cassandra was fated to know/see/tell accurate predictions, but no one would believe them, and she had no power to alter the outcomes.

This wouldn’t be much of a curse if the prophecies were positive. It’s a tormenting burden only if the predictions are negative, and that became Cassandra’s cross to bear. She foresaw the fall of Troy to the Greeks, but no one in Troy believed her. Troy was subsequently defeated and destroyed. The fable wends its way through many complicated episodic dramas, and after her death Cassandra was sent to Elysian Fields and honored as dedicated and faithful. Given the curse, however, Cassandra’s life was no picnic and far from a pleasure.

The myth of Cassandra has come down to us today, in modern civilization, as a frightening archetype — the terrible psychological (or even spiritual) suffering that occurs for anyone who is able to accurately foresee future disasters that could be avoided, but whose concerns and warnings are discounted, disregarded, dismissed, or just plain not believed. The archetype is linked with “moral conscience.”

All this is preface to a question that I ask myself all too often. In my public writing — essentially through these commentaries — my consistent orientation about civilization, the collective state of humanity, and our shared future leans away from optimism and toward concern (some would say alarm). So, am I a Chicken Little or a Cassandra?

To check out the former possibility, that of being a Chicken Little, I’ve explored alternative views. Over the past year, I’ve read two books and many articles, along with watching various presentations on video (Ted Talks and the like) that present a more optimistic outlook. The basic orientation of the authors and presenters of these offerings is that things are better than many people (including me) believe. Warnings of dire consequences are unwarranted by the facts, they say. The “doomed” mentality is mistaken and wrong-headed, or so they insist, and has always been a kind of negative cottage industry for those who succumb to fear or despair.

Try as I might, however, I remain unconvinced about their optimism. While my efforts at self-reeducation have informed me about some positive developments, the overall balance of where we are collectively and where we’re headed still seems to me skewed decidedly toward the negative. I’ve always felt (and continue to believe) that a large number of human beings are doing whatever and as much as they can to make this world we inhabit together a saner place with less unnecessary suffering. I do not suggest that humans are loathsome or despicable, but I worry that we are simply not far enough along in ameliorating the dark side of human nature to overcome the forces in ourselves that are sweeping us toward various cliffs.

So, my conclusion is that I’m not Chicken Little. The sky may really be falling or, at the very least, is in danger of doing so. That leaves me to face the second option, that of my being a Cassandra.

Yes, that sounds about right — I’m a Cassandra. Cursed to be able to foresee the general shape of what’s coming, but powerless to prevent it.

The good news in this is that, unlike Cassandra, I’m not alone. On a planet with more than seven billion human beings, many millions of Cassandra’s exist. We cut across all the different demographics — young, old, scientific/academic, and/or religious/spiritual. Cassandras come in every conceivable variety — from

tin-hat wild, woolly, and way out there to thoughtful, reasonable, and well informed. Some people I include in the wild and woolly category would probably protest that they are eminently reasonable and well informed. What I'm referring to is really consensus versus eccentricity, basically, the middle of the Cassandra bell curve as opposed to the wings. Some concerns about our collective situation and possible futures are more common; others are more unusual. That doesn't mean that the middle of the bell curve is necessarily reasonable or more likely to be accurate — it may or may not be.

In the Greek fable, Cassandra was cursed to *accurately* see the future. Since the accuracy of a vision can be judged only through hindsight, after the fact, I expand the Cassandra Complex to include anyone who offers a warning to humanity based on a possible vision of the future. The warning seems implicit, whether to prevent disaster or help us survive it should the vision come to pass. Some people have a pessimistic or dystopian vision of the future that offers no remedies or solace. I'm not sure that I would include those people in the Cassandra category.

Cassandras are not uniformly doomers. Our visions are not all apocalyptic, nor are we necessarily focused solely or even mainly on events. Fire and brimstone represent only a small subset of the Cassandra Complex. The possibilities for mass suffering — through nuclear armageddon, environmental disaster, economic meltdown, social chaos, etc. — are certainly real enough in the 21st century, but the scenarios themselves are less compelling to me than the causes behind them, most of which seem to be embedded in the complexities of human nature.

Most Cassandras are not debaters. They don't so much argue for a position as present a vision of concern about where humanity is and where it's headed. That's not to suggest that such people are "visionaries" in the popular connotation of that term, which invokes the supernatural. Some people are indeed visionaries in the sense of receiving images from transpersonal realms beyond their ordinary consciousness. Most people aren't.

Whatever the particular vision of a given Cassandra, the rub here is that visions are akin to dreams. Reality — whether past, present, or future — is notoriously slippery and difficult to grasp. On occasion, someone has a vision of the future that turns out to be extraordinarily prescient. That's exceedingly rare, however. Typically, the possible futures we consider are simplifications, not necessarily one-dimensional, but certainly no match for the incomprehensible fullness of actual reality. Most of the time, the future that arrives to become the present is a surprise.

An old saying in the Sufi tradition is: "*He who knows does not say.*" The rest of us — including those who do not know, those who pretend to know but don't, and those who are uncertain — do most of the talking. I don't pretend to know

how the future will look. Decades ago, when I was younger, I had no comprehensive vision about the shape of the future. I did have a vague idea, based on certain expectations, presumptions, and preconceived ideas, but I admit that I'm surprised (and at times downright shocked) by the reality of the present in 2018.

If the good Lord's willin' and the creek don't rise, I'll probably continue to write about civilization and collective humanity. I'm motivated to do so not because of any overriding personal confidence in my insights, but for two other reasons. One is my expertise in the symbolic system of astrology, which seems to be connected to reality, although how and why are still mysterious to me after nearly half a century of study. When connected to history, astrology can illuminate our understanding. I will no doubt continue to try to share what astrology shows me, at least as much as my abilities as a writer allow.

The other reason I write is to not feel quite so alone.

I already have my share of ongoing lessons in humility, so I'll do the best I can to avoid the trap of making foolish predictions.