

Seventh-Inning Stretch

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*"For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world
and lose his own soul?"*

— Jesus

This well-known and often-quoted question from Scripture (actually more an admonition than a question) offered by Jesus of Nazareth to his followers is rendered in many different English translations from the original Greek text, depending on what version of the Bible one reads. All the different translations are variations on the same basic theme, however. They all suggest that to "gain the world" (meaning to enjoy material comforts or wealth) doesn't "profit" (meaning does no good for) a person if it costs him his "soul" (meaning his life and connection to Spirit).

Individually, many humans are mindful of this caution and strive to honor its meaning in how they live. Collectively, however, we have ignored it.

When I use the term "collectively" in this context, I'm not referring to all of us together as a collection of individuals, but neither am I focusing on just certain privileged people, such as the ruling elites at the top of the pyramid of social-political-economic-class hierarchies — the movers and shakers in corporate boardrooms, government offices, or sprawling McMansions. In other words, I'm not pointing a finger at the wealthy and powerful or those who make policy for how society is structured and operates. Instead, I'm writing about the unconscious agreement that forms the overall zeitgeist or archetype field. This is the water around the fish, so to speak — the invisible, oceanic ether of assumptions and beliefs in which we live, breathe, think, feel, and act.

This is not to suggest that I like the elites or am OK with what they do. I don't, and I'm not. But I don't regard them as the root cause of our problems. Rather, they are the class of privileged yet dutiful soldiers who convert the invisible zeitgeist into tangible action, somewhat akin to the flying monkeys in the Wizard of Oz who were the minions of the Wicked Witch of the West and did her bidding.

I'm not a Christian. That ship sailed for me early on in my life. Yes, I was baptized as a Methodist, but Church religion never took for me, Protestant or otherwise. I don't accept Jesus as my savior (so I think of him as Jesus of Nazareth rather than Jesus the Christ). To me, the historical Jesus was a social

revolutionary every bit as much as a spiritual teacher. He was the original Marxist, nearly two millennia before Marx and Engels theorized about class warfare and the rise of the proletariat.

While damn near everything Jesus is supposed to have said is now memorialized in Christianity, certain quotes are more frequently cited than others. The one with which I began this Commentary is certainly high on the list. Another is:

"It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

That is clearly the assertion of a hard-core social radical, a community activist and social justice warrior bent on overturning the class- and wealth-based status quo. From what I can gather, Jesus wasn't some airy-fairy spiritual guru preaching transcendence to escape a wicked world, but a full-fledged, committed cultural revolutionary, suggesting that we bring Heaven down to Earth.

So, what's my point?

Well, here we are, facing the most dire and urgent crisis in all of human history — catastrophic climate collapse. That crisis didn't just happen by itself — we humans created it through our willful unconsciousness. We thought we were separate from Nature and could do whatever the hell we wanted. For a long time, it looked like we might be right. But we turned out to be wrong.

The stark reality of disruptive climate change is so overwhelming that every other human problem pales in comparison: racism, war, economic inequality, the technological singularity, etc. The distant hope of solving any of these other problems won't matter one whit if we don't immediately stop destroying our earthly environment. We don't have another millennia or even another century to get our act together and change how we live. We have to do it NOW. And at this point, the odds of our doing *anything* substantive to ameliorate or minimize catastrophic climate change seem so slim as to be effectively nonexistent. It appears that the best we can do is — like the mad emperor Nero — to fiddle while Rome burns, posting cat videos on Facebook and YouTube or insulting each other on Twitter.

Case in point: Recently, Oregon's overwhelmingly Democratic legislature was about to pass a bill mandating a comprehensive carbon-tax plan that would significantly reform the state's entire industrial economy. As might be presumed, the profit-driven sector of the corporate business sector opposed the bill. But that opposition wasn't limited to lobbying. Eleven of Oregon's Republican representatives fled the state in what was termed a "walk-out," intending to stop the bill from passing by denying the legislature a quorum. Oregon's governor sent state law enforcement troopers to haul back the missing representatives to Salem, the state capitol, but the Republicans' gambit succeeded. They remained on the lam, and the bill died without passage. This is yet another Death Culture suicide pact among those who have long flirted with insanity and have now gone

completely around the bend into stark, raving madness. It's sickening, but it's where we are. If the other side can't win in legitimate ways, then they cheat. Any means justify the desired ends, and screw what the public wants. Stated succinctly, the bad guys have been profoundly emboldened in America and around the world, and at this point they're winning.

Considered from the perspective of baseball, we're in the seventh-inning stretch, and the home team is way down with only a couple more innings to go before the game is over. From the lame standpoint of the permanent political class and the corrupt duopoly of Democrats and Republicans, it turns out that many star players on "our side" long ago sold out — games have been rigged and thrown.

Of course, that's a false analogy. The real home team isn't Dems or Repugs. It's the public, which supports (and foots the bill for) the games themselves. The players wear uniforms with team colors of blue or red, but it's the fans who get taken for a ride. We the people are losing, although some of us don't realize it.

What will it take to change the zeitgeist? What has to happen to shock us sufficiently to even *consider* (much less actually implement) policies that reverse our willful status quo of headlong, bat-shit-crazy, greed-driven business-as-usual? How do we stop the suicidal juggernaut, given that it's the entire system?

From where I sit (which is, admittedly, not a very high perch), it looks like what it will take is a series of serious, probably dreadful disasters — environmental collapse or financial/economic meltdown being the two most likely candidates. One can, of course, make the case that such environmental disasters are already underway: melting polar ice caps, deadly heat waves in Europe, prolonged droughts in the Middle East, hurricanes in the Caribbean, floods in the American Midwest, small islands in the Pacific soon to be submerged by rising ocean levels, savage forest fires in California. And financial/economic meltdown is waiting in the wings, lurking in the shadows. But the examples above are just early-stage incremental blips on the radar. The human suffering caused by such events is still measured in relatively small numbers. The Butcher's Bill of tragedy is not yet sufficiently large to shock us awake, nor widespread enough to achieve the critical mass of a 40,000-volt cosmic cattle prod.

Look, dear friends, I don't like being a Cassandra. I hate coming off like a cheerleader for more bad shit to happen. My number one core value is less suffering, not more. And yet, I can't avoid what I see happening in the world. Some people are so hypnotized by the seductions of the zeitgeist that they are the equivalent of drowning swimmers who hysterically fight off the lifeguard who tries to help them back to the safety of shore, even to the point of endangering their rescuers. That's yet another flawed metaphor, of course. Drowning swimmers are completely panicked, whereas the people I'm referring to willfully believe themselves to be not only in control, but downright superior, and altogether correct in what they're doing. They are certain that their beliefs are real and true and right.

As much as I would like to turn those people from Them into Us, I don't know how to achieve that without letting them win. What I do know is that they have to be stopped — defeated, neutralized, prevented from causing further harm to all of us.

When children get hysterical, the family systems wisdom is to hold them — firmly but as gently as possible until they calm down, stop flailing, and return to their senses, coming back into the fold of togetherness from terrified alienation that is aggressive and violent. With the people I'm talking about, I'm not sure that there's any equivalent tactic. They don't believe that they're hysterical, their violence is intentional, and they're unaware of having gone crazy.

The line between righteous and self-righteous is damn near invisible. Cross over it, though, and you're lost. I ask myself, *"Have I become self-righteous in dogmatic certainty about my own beliefs? Am I just the other side of the coin of the Koch brothers and those Republican representatives in Oregon? Am I as crazy as they are, just the polar opposite?"*

To the very best of my ability to discern, the answer I keep coming up with is **No**. I admit that I'm definitely fallible, often full of shit, and seriously damaged, but so is everyone I know and everyone I've ever met. However, that doesn't make me *Wrong*, especially about catastrophic climate change.

And what to do about those who are wrong? Those who believe that climate change is a hoax, that white people are innately superior, that the rich are more deserving and money is all that matters, that the invisible hand of the market or an unwanted pregnancy is God's will and must be obeyed? I don't want to kill those people, but neither am I willing to accept the world they want to create and force on us all. From my perspective, they must not be allowed to win.

Look, I get it that the vast majority of people mean well, especially early on. The folks who built Facebook and Twitter didn't set out to do harm by unleashing and amplifying the worst aspects of human nature, but that's what's happened, and their techno-evangelism prevents them from seeing it, much less correcting their platforms and business models. People who run for elected office are usually motivated by the desire to do good for the collective, even though too many of them reach a point where they'll do anything to cling to power, no matter how absurd or craven. Their egos don't see their own dark sides emerging and rationalize the changes as necessary. But that's part of the terrible irony of being human — we start out with good intentions and too often end up corrupted by self-delusion.

This is where we are as a species. Our stunning success has boomeranged on itself, setting up not just tragically unintended consequences, but even the distinct possibility of our demise. I wish I had a viable solution on which we could all agree — a way to save us and the world from ourselves — but I don't, at least not today.