Driving Backwards

by Bill Herbst

How does civilization move into the future?

The metaphor I'll use here to describe that process is the title of this commentary: *We drive backwards.*

Admittedly, this analogy is fast approaching the end of its shelf life. The rapidly-developing technology of self-driving vehicles may soon render it obsolete, an anachronism from the first century of America's "happy motoring." Nonetheless, I'll use it in this commentary because nearly everyone can relate to it.

Have you ever driven an automobile backwards? Most of us have. We do so, however, only for short distances and at very low speeds. Why? Because when we drive backwards, the "big picture" we see out beyond the windshield is where we have been. Where we're going is visible only in two views, either by twisting our bodies in the driver's seat and peering out the back window (which is awkward, given that the steering wheel and pedals are in front of us), or by looking at the tiny image provided by the rear-view mirror mounted high up in the middle of the front windshield. This twisting and reversal of views is disorienting, making safe control of the moving vehicle quite difficult. For one thing, the front wheels — linked with steering — become effectively the back wheels, reversing the effect of the steering wheel. Turning the vehicle to the left requires turning the steering wheel to the right (or vice versa). Also, keeping the vehicle moving straight is difficult because of our twisted position as the driver.

In short, driving backwards is dangerous. Even if we diligently practiced backwards driving, gradually acclimating our senses and improving our skills, it's inherently wrong. Yes, we could probably get better at driving backwards with time and practice, but it would never be as safe as driving forwards.

And yet, that's how civilization moves into the future.

We invent, innovate, design, manufacture, and market stuff (pretty much everything), thinking mostly about how doing so will change the past and improve the future. Sure, we have a vision in our heads about the future we're creating, but we cannot see it clearly or in detail. The "improved future" is only one possible outcome among many, and most of the other outcomes are

invisible to us until they manifest. Some of these are more toxic than benign, and some are downright catastrophic. One thing is certain, though: Unforeseen repercussions and unintended consequences of everything humans create are the rule, not the exception.

The Industrial Revolution, which brought us fossil fuels and agri-business (among so many other things) and created modern civilization, was not intended to wreck the planet, but it has.

When Hiram Maxim invented the modern machine gun, he considered the weapon so horrific that it would end war. It didn't. Instead, it was a significant step in amplifying the deadly violence of war into an industrial-scale nightmare.

The physicists who revealed the possibility of atomic fission and nuclear power didn't intend their discoveries to be used to create nuclear weapons that would become a permanent Sword of Damocles looming just over humanity's head, but that's the future that happened. The proponents of atomic energy in the 1950s Assured us that nuclear reactors would be built so carefully as to guarantee their being "clean and safe," but Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Fukushima did, in fact, occur.

These are just three of a nearly infinite number of examples of the corruption — sometimes inadvertent, but too often intentional — of optimistic dreams and good intentions. Our fantasies of "progress" and a more perfect future are always undone by unforeseen repercussions and unintended consequences. Such are the inherent risks of driving backwards.

Collectively (and too frequently individually as well), we are moving through a time where the metaphor of driving backwards is stretched to the breaking point. Due to a host of interlocking factors — which include market forces and financial imperatives — the global economy has accelerated to insane levels. It's the equivalent of driving backwards through town and ignoring every stop sign and traffic signal, or driving backwards on the freeway at 100 miles per hour.

Forget about the wisdom of turning around and driving forward. That's out of the question. Nor is the common sense of perhaps slowing down or stopping a possibility. Nope. Despite the obvious fact that what we're creating with our headlong, backwards-looking rush into an ever more perilous future is already producing disastrous wrecks every day, we cannot stop or even slow down. It's not that we shouldn't. We should. And it's not that no one wants to. Many of us do. We're trapped in a vehicle moving at breakneck speed, like a runaway train (but that's a different metaphor…). The system itself overwhelms all sanity.

And so a significant percentage of people let go of their sanity. If reality is unmanageable, let's live in fantasy instead.

I'm not suggesting that no one is working to turn things around. At every level of society and in every dimension of human experience, people exist who are working their butts off to try to prevent disaster. At this point, however, I don't think there's a snowball's chance in hell of our collectively coming together to do so. Something fundamental will have to change before we address the daunting array of problems that beset us.

Also, I'm not referring to any specific melodrama unfolding in the news. This goes way beyond individual issues. It's not just about leadership or the elites or a particular group of Americans, either. It's about the whole country. All of us.

Here we are, all riding in the car of civilization, headed down the road hell-bent for leather. Driving backwards.