

Transcendence in the 21st Century

Part Two (of Two)

by Bill Herbst

Version 1.9 (posted on 14 January 2020)
© 2020 by the author, all rights reserved

[In last week's first installment of this two-part commentary, I discussed the nature and discipline of transcendence in spirituality, at least as it interests me. Here in Part Two, I'll head off in a different direction and discuss the unlikely but critical merging of spirituality and ordinary life.]

For 200,000 years, human beings lived in small groups, essentially kinship bands. Our numbers were small, less than a million, and our industrial and technological activities were minimal. Basically, we did very little harm to the earth's physical environment during that time, and the ecosystem easily absorbed whatever byproducts our actions produced. Nature ruled. Humans loved and feared the power of the earth. We regarded the natural world as sacred even as we strove to overcome it by creating artificial environments that better suited our needs and desires, our wishes for more comfort, pleasure, safety, and convenience.

Starting about 500 years ago, with the beginnings of European colonization of the western hemisphere, the calculus of our collective human future began to change significantly as industry intensified and technology gained steam. Each century after that pushed the envelope further. In the 20th century, we reached the limits of the earth's capacity to absorb the effects of cumulative human activity. Now, in the 21st century, with almost eight billion of us living and our industrial and technological engines having reached juggernaut proportions, we have blown through those limits, with the result that our collective impact on the earth's ecosystem carries with it enormous consequences — not just for humanity, but for all life on earth.

Homo Sapiens started out as competitive and cooperative. We still embody both, but in modern civilization (i.e., predatory capitalism) we've fetishized competition. Humans are a very aggressive and contentious species; our disagreements and in-fighting amongst ourselves will undoubtedly continue. But no longer can we do whatever the hell we want to the environment and trust that Nature will accommodate our excesses and disharmonies. The planet is adapting to the heavy footprint of human activity by heating up, and that's bad news for all of us.

From this point on, the debate has ended about the reality of anthropogenic climate change. Only fools, idiots, or liars continue to deny that humans have dramatically disturbed the natural environment. The question now becomes whether we can do anything to limit the disastrous effects of a rapidly heating planet. Either way, whether or not it's too late, the remedies proposed over coming decades by those in power are unlikely to succeed in rescuing us.

The problem goes beyond carbon emissions from fossil fuels, beyond a corporate carbon tax exchange, and far beyond thousands of square miles of wind farms and solar panel arrays. Such reforms will be proposed and may be implemented, but our economic system and financial structures won't fundamentally change. The rich and powerful will still strive to control all the resources through ownership, as they always have. They're very skilled at that — using their clout to increase their wealth and influence, creating personal and family dynasties that become fiefdoms and effectively set policy for us all. The extreme inequality between the Haves and the Have Nots won't change just because we switch over to more renewable, less toxic ways to generate energy. Weaning ourselves off fossil fuels won't stop our destruction of the natural world for economic gain by replacing biodiverse ecosystems with monocultures.

We cannot trust the leadership in politics and business to come up with any truly viable solutions, in part because they are unwilling to give up the systems that created the problem in the first place. Those in power tend to believe fervently in the neoliberal edict of infinite economic growth. They will resist to their dying breaths anything that involves slowing down the economy, limiting profits, or cutting back on our profligate consumption of energy and extraction of natural resources. For them, more is always better. Watch any mainstream media outlet, and the message is always the same: more growth and larger economies, never cutting back or making do with less.

The rulers of this country — who are predominantly white, male, and almost without exception in the top 10% of wealthiest Americans — are *not* the “best and brightest” among us. They are, by and large, simply the most driven to command and wield power — power to run the world, power to shape events, power to control others. That makes them effectively spiritual adolescents and very far from the wise elders we need. Billionaires come in different flavors, but as a class are not good role models. Neither are elected officials. Yeah, they're the winners, all right, but we emulate them at our peril.

But what about the rest of us? What about the masses, the so-called regular or ordinary people? Are we ignorant? Do we not care? Well, I'm sure that both ignorance and lack of care exist among people, but, by and large, I presume that most of us don't fall into those categories. Why, then, is there not a collective outcry raised every single day about what's happening? I think it's because people are busy and occupied. They have bills to pay, a monthly nut, families to provide for and take care of. For this, they need careers or jobs that yield a

paycheck, since the majority of us aren't rich. Sure, the lifestyles of most Americans would be considered wealthy by the standards of much of the global population, and unimaginably wealthy compared to most earlier humans who ever drew breath on this planet (which is not the same as being happier or better off...). Still, the vast majority of Americans — meaning the lower 80% financially — are stretched pretty thin financially and scrambling to make ends meet to keep the wolf from the door.

In addition to the constraints of time and energy, other reasons why we're not all out in the streets protesting are the seductions of consumerism and the constant onslaught of manipulation by marketing. (Try to find an ad that suggests living more simply, doing less, or not buying something. Fat chance.) We are creatures of our times and places, and in here-and-now America, the prevailing cultural memes are all about getting and having more — better stuff, a bigger house, that next vacation getaway, and anything you want delivered next day from Amazon.

Beyond the practical, however, are the less tangible but important questions of meaning. People who are hungry aren't very concerned with meaning (or spirituality, for that matter). If you're starving, the greater good doesn't matter. Most Americans aren't starving, however, so we could conceivably turn our attention to whether or not our lives have meaning.

The media is beginning to acknowledge that we're now moving closer to a real crisis of meaning in America. I'd suggest that we're already far into that crisis. Consuming is very satisfying in the short run, but it's not working out so well in the long run. As an institution, organized religion is still a refuge of meaning, but for a smaller percentage of Americans than in earlier centuries. Escape into technological virtual realities — social media, video games, and streaming entertainment — is effectively a culture-wide mass phenomenon. People are increasingly addicted to screens. Speaking of addiction, the opioid problem and rising rates of suicide are tell-tale indicators of growing despair.

To some extent, this loss of meaning has come about because the ordinary activities of culture — politics and commerce in particular, meaning government and business — are increasingly divorced from any clear notion of greater good for the collective. Personal considerations — what's in it for me? — have always played a dominant role in our decisions and behavior, and that's not coming to an end in any foreseeable future, but the extent to which that self-centered motivation is acceptable has reached the point of seriously diminishing returns. The greater good (meaning what benefits all of us) cannot be left to take care of itself. The "invisible hand of the market" simply won't cut it.

Let me simplify this by putting it into percentage ratios. Considered from the perspective of all humanity, I'd put the motivation of personal fulfillment versus the greater good at a ratio of 80%-20%. Maybe it's 90-10, but I don't think it's

70-30. What I'd like to see is 50-50. Well, actually I'd prefer 40-60, but I think that's asking for too much from humans. I'll settle for 50-50.

Obviously, some individuals will be characteristically more self-centered, while some others will be less so. Also, in any particular situation, any of us may operate more from one perspective than the other. When I list the overall ratios, I'm thinking of the entire bell curve.

As we move further into the emerging and intensifying crisis of this century, the regular activities of the village in terms of business-as-usual must change. To counter the destructive momentum of More-is-Better and Us-versus-Them, we'll need as many voices as possible raised from people who believe in humility and compassion, frugality and simplicity, and are, at the very least, willing to consider acting for the greater good rather than for their immediate self-interest. That will require us to rethink what it means to be human.

A fundamental shift in our most basic presumptions is necessary. Scaling back civilization's unquenchable appetite for ever more energy and healing our collective illness of decreasing meaning is going to take hundreds of millions — perhaps billions — of people who are willing to give up some of the conveniences and shiny consumer toys of modern life, to live more simply and closer to harmony with nature and with each other. Love of money as the dominant value of civilization cannot continue without profound harm. Where needs and desires are concerned, taking care of oneself only or just the small number of people one loves personally is no longer a successful strategy for our continued existence on this planet.

I'm not suggesting that taking care of oneself or one's family and friends is a bad thing. What I'm lobbying for is a different balance of consideration between personal fulfillment and the greater good. We can choose this rebalancing or suffer the consequences of civilization breaking down in ways no one will like.

I don't know if such a transformation of collective consciousness can happen. Realistically, it seems extremely doubtful. And even if it does transpire, humanity may still be in for a very bad time. If collective transformation doesn't occur, however, our goose is surely cooked.

In the 21st century, spirituality in general and transcendence in particular must no longer remain private, personal matters.