

Change or Die

by Bill Herbst

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Change or Die — stark, blunt, and unforgiving.

Change and death are processes in life that are perpetually with us. Neither is rare. Both are ongoing and relentless in upsetting our apple carts. Just when we think we've achieved a measure of stability, security, comfort, and an overall situation we like, along come change and death to show us the impermanence of all our human plans and schemes, to remind us that we are not the Center of the Universe, and we are sure as hell not the Masters of the Cosmos, nor the Masters of the Earth, nor even the Masters of Ourselves.

This is one of the messages of the 2020s for Americans and, indeed, for all of humanity. There will be other messages in this decade, of course — other transmissions from Cosmic Central about where we are and where we're headed — but Change or Die is the most fundamental.

Throughout the roughly 12,000-year history of what we politely call "civilization," humans have played out all our melodramas. Some are so common as to be banal, while others are less frequent, more rare and extraordinary. Whatever their form, however, a salient feature of human folly and foolishness during our long gestation was that Nature — meaning the Earth — took very little notice of our hubris. Gaia didn't react much. She sucked up whatever nonsense humans created and went her merry way, which allowed Life on this planet to continue to evolve and flourish.

What's different now is that our cumulative impact — humanity's collective footprint — on the earth's biosphere is so enlarged and toxic that Nature can no longer ignore us. Now She is reacting, changing to adapt to what we do.

The human species has come a long way in a relatively short time toward increasing our power. As we have figured out how to manipulate material reality, we haven't correspondingly increased our wisdom and maturity. What this means to my way of thinking is that while our will to Power galloped ahead, our ability to Love remained pretty much the same. That's a problem, because Power and Love require each other.

Love is the recognition of perfection. When we love someone or something, we see in it the signature of the Divine. We experience beauty, delight, wonder, and a profound sense of meaning. By contrast, Power is the practical ability to alter an environment, to reshape it to our intention. To digest one's breakfast is a

process of changing the shape of nutrients into a form that our bodies can use. That's autonomic — it happens without our awareness — but it remains an expression of power. Sometimes we use power consciously, other times unconsciously.

Balance in proportion is critical for Love and Power to be mutually effective. Love without Power causes suffering, while Power without Love produces chaos. If I love you but don't have the ability to manipulate the environment to bring us closer to relatedness or union (whether that manipulation is physical or psychological), I suffer the hell of unrequited Love. The object of my affection remains distant and unresponsive. On the other hand, if I possess all the Power in the world but insufficient Love, then I can change anything, but I have no sense of what perfection would be, no guide as to what to change things into (and what *not* to change things into...). I may use my Power — very few humans amass power without then using it — but doing so will result inevitably in unintended consequences that are chaotic and not at all what I wanted.

The problem is not that Power has beaten down Love within humanity. It's that Love has not kept pace, staying pretty much the same while Power — our ability to change environments — has grown exponentially. Love grows arithmetically, loping along one person at a time, while Power grows algebraically, standing on the shoulders of its forebears.

And it's not about quantity, either. There's enough Love within humanity to guide our use of Power, but the form it takes is mostly personal love, which is to say, love linked to desire and attachment — otherwise known as *conditional love*. In the Us-versus-Them dynamic that is a central feature of human nature, this kind of Love is reserved for a small number of Us, but not offered at all to huge numbers of Them. In other words, we tend to use our Power to benefit our few beloveds (Us), but the consequences of that Power on the many of Them don't matter to us.

For instance, some humans care only about other humans. Animals are "beasts" — dumb creatures that don't count (except for pets and certain cute, human-like animal babies). Their consciousness goes unnoticed, as does their suffering at our hands. The same disregard extends to all plant life. In our hubris, many of us fail to recognize the interconnectedness and mutual interdependence of all life forms on earth, so the consequences of our misuse of power on other species is of no concern. So what if we destroy the forests and kill the oceans, which are the incubators and nurseries of all life on this planet? We don't care. More precisely, we're not smart enough and wise enough to factor in the wellness of the biosphere in determining what we do and how we do it. Too many of us believe that the only value is human utility in economic and monetary terms.

The upshot is that, in an almost unbelievably short time, humans have wreaked havoc on this planet. We have messed with Nature, which is now protecting Herself from us. I don't want to anthropomorphize Nature. I won't suggest that She's angry with us or punishing us for our sins. I don't believe that. But I do believe that the ways Nature is adapting to the cumulative impact of human

insults to this garden planet — by heating up the biosphere — will quite possibly lead to the extinction of our human species, and probably sooner than later.

I've written before that just stopping our use of fossil fuels won't save us. A million acres of wind farms, massive fleets of electric cars, and solar or (heaven forbid) nuclear energy aren't adequate as answers. Sure, our resistance over the past half-century to conversion toward cleaner, renewable energy sources has been clearly very foolish — one might almost say damning. At this point, however, the feedback loops that could cause sudden and extreme global warming are terrifyingly close. The hour is late, perhaps too late. We may already be past the tipping point.

For instance, consider the aerosol masking effect. Suspended semi-liquid particles in the upper atmosphere from burning fossil fuels reflect some sunlight back into space, preventing that solar heat energy from reaching the earth's surface. This cools the biosphere, countering to some extent the increasing temperatures of trapped heat caused by CO₂ emissions and other greenhouse gases. If we stopped entirely burning fossil fuels tomorrow, cessation of the aerosol masking effect would occur within months as those particles quickly precipitate out, resulting in a sudden and dramatic rise in average global temperatures. That might be enough all by itself to do us in, so it's uncertain that any "solutions" we might undertake now or in the future would avert disaster. We might be damned if we do and damned if we don't.

Whether or not we're screwed, however, it's not in our nature to give up without a fight. We will try. But "trying" doesn't mean simply altering our energy sources and our industrial or consumptive behavior. The *change* in "Change or Die" also requires expanding our consciousness to include more beings we consider "Us" and fewer we disregard as "Them." The change requires more universal and unconditional Love. It requires an expanded set of values beyond just economics and money. It requires our giving up the nihilistic attitude of "*après nous, le déluge*" (French for "after us, the flood"). The modern death-culture version of that saying is "*the good life for me and mine, and screw everyone else.*"

My best guess is that maybe a quarter of humanity is already working in these directions. Three-quarters aren't, though. And the odds of that 75% coming around simply by choice are probably very slim. But odds can change, and choice may have relatively little to do with the coming decades. Force majeure may.

If or when the feces hits the fan, as it may, the challenge for that quarter of humanity that is already working toward change will be to help keep the three-quarters from freaking out. That process is akin to the medical procedure of *triage*. It's one hell of a challenge.

As individuals, death comes for us all. That's just how Life works here on earth. The real question is whether our species and our earthly family might survive and prosper into the future.

And so it comes down to this: *Change or die.*