

Civilization

by Bill Herbst

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Civilization is a lovely idea and a brilliant invention if you're one of the winners. For them, it's a banquet of delights. For the senses, there's great food, fine clothes, amazing houses, travel to exotic places, continual entertainment, and luxuries of every sort. Civilization is also a feast of social and cultural pleasures. For the spirit longing for wonder, there's beautiful art and religion, and for the curious intellect that craves stimuli, there's learning of every kind, from the practical and ingenious to the abstract and philosophical. The problem, of course, is that civilization has been constructed in a way that allows relatively few winners and a whole lot of losers.

For the losers, civilization sucks. Their experience of life is accompanied by the ever-present possibility of anxiety, rejection, denial, and suffering. Sometimes this is only a background tone that can be ignored, but it may erupt into nightmarish reality at a moment's notice. Sure, the winners suffer too, through difficulties that include illness, accident, and eventual death, but the losers experience suffering on a daily basis as the normal state of affairs. That makes them more keen to feel joy whenever and however they can.

Part of joy for the losers is cooking and eating food. For women, this means most often cooking indoors in the kitchen with water, and for the men, most often cooking outdoors over fire. For the winners, cooking is mainly something done for them by others, who are sometimes skilled, artisanal winners (fine chefs at restaurants), but more often hired losers (maids and cooks at home).

Civilization is not a living organism. It's an organized structure, a mechanism, or perhaps a collection of commonly accepted narratives or memes. However we think of it, civilization doesn't care that there are a few winners and many losers. Civilization doesn't care about anything. Whether or not we have computers, social media, smart phones, and cars or live in caves without electricity or indoor plumbing is of no concern.

Civilization will accommodate anything we create, and modern civilization does this with astonishing rapidity. Are you old enough to remember when microwave ovens were first invented and marketed? The first generation of consumer microwaves were expensive. And yet, America went from a country with no microwave ovens to a country literally crammed with tens of millions of

microwave ovens — essentially one in every home — so fast that it made your head swim. I remember the time frame as about 15 years from onset to capitulation. Social media didn't exist before 2006, and the iPhone was introduced in 2007. Look where they (and we) are now. Modern civilization, with its on-demand industry and marketing, adapts in a flash.

The obvious problem with the speed of such transformations is that as a society we have almost no time to consider the ramifications of what we're doing — what might be gained versus what could be lost, as well as the repercussions and unintended consequences of the changes. In modern civilization, the pursuit of money as profit through business is so central and so urgent that we really have no time to consider whether or not the changes we make are wise.

There's a great line from *Citizen Kane*, the landmark 1941 Orson Welles movie, that illustrates this perfectly. Early on in the film is a scene where Kane's financier, a character called Mr. Bernstein — played by Everett Sloane, one of Welles' Mercury Theatre stock company of actors who fill the movie — responds during an interview to a reporter's comment that the deceased Kane made an awful lot of money. Bernstein says, "*It's no trick to make an awful lot of money if all you want is to make a lot of money.*"

Therein we have two of the core dilemmas of modern civilization: Money is one; the other is how we evaluate decisions about what to do and what not to do.

Our obsessive, driven, and frankly insane focus on money is usually criticized under the moral transgression and religious sin of *greed*. I'm not sure that's always correct, though. Sure, greed plays a part, especially when we're talking about individuals. But money is the engine that makes modern civilization run. It's primary fuel every bit as much as greed is a motivation. Almost nothing noteworthy happens in civilization without money (although much of what does happen because of money is less noteworthy and more perverse).

To my way of thinking, however, the second dilemma is actually more important.

In the kaleidoscopic realm of the many contradictory and paradoxical elements that make up what we call human nature, *simplicity* and *complexity* are prominent. We love simplicity, and we also love complexity. Too often, though, we get them confused and do one when the other would be wiser. The KISS rule — "*Keep it simple, stupid*" — may be good advice on occasion, but we need another, equally pithy phrase that expresses the opposite (if we have one, I can't call it to mind...).

In a general way, I think it's safe to say that actions are better kept simple, while values should be more complex. Yes, we can master very complicated sequences of behavior — after all, playing the violin isn't a simple act — but we need to learn and master each step by keeping it as simple as possible before chaining it

to the next behavior in the sequence, then ultimately integrating all the steps into a seamless whole. That's what playing scales as a piano student is all about.

With values, however, keeping it simple works against us, often dramatically. Values define what we care about, and mature people care about a great many things. Conversely, immature people tend to care only about whatever particular thing they're focused on passionately, often to the exclusion of all else, and that gets them (and us) into trouble. I'm referring here to what is typically called "karma" in popular metaphysics.

There's an old joke that's actually more of a moral parable about an ugly guy who somehow manages to sleep with a different woman every day. His envious buddy asks him to reveal the secret of his sexual success with women, to which our ugly guy says, *"I stand on the street corner and ask each woman who passes if she'll screw me."* Taken aback, his friend asks, *"But don't you get rejected a lot or slapped in the face often?"* "Sure," our ugly guy replies, *"but I just ask the next woman and as many as necessary after that until one of them says yes."*

The moral of the joke, like the *Citizen Kane* quote, is that if all you want is one thing — in this case to get laid — then achieving it is straightforward and relatively easy. If, however, you care about minimizing rejection, or you care about your choice of partners, or you care about loving intimacy, or you want to be with your lover in an ongoing relationship, that's a whole different story. If your values are complex and interwoven, so that fulfilling your intention or goal requires ticking off all the boxes for the many things you care about, then manifesting your goal, desire, need, or intention becomes infinitely more challenging and complicated. What you want isn't to sleep with just *any* woman, but only with the *right* woman.

The upshot of all this is this: Now that America and humanity are staring down the barrel of the greatest crises and calamities we've ever faced, there is frightening uncertainty as to whether we have the capacity to make and implement wise decisions. Civilization hasn't prepared us for any of what's coming, and we're going to need all the maturity we can muster.

Right now, I see little evidence to support much optimism. But perhaps the disintegration and destruction currently underway are a necessary prerequisite to getting our heads screwed on straighter. Who knows? When push comes to shove, maybe we'll rise to the occasion.

They say that suffering builds character. While that may be true for certain people at certain times, it's often not the case. At any rate, I think we're going to find out.