

Other Lives

by Bill Herbst

Version 1.3 (posted on 1 September 2020)

© 2020 by the author, all rights reserved

What would it have been like to have lived in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, or later during World War II in the ravages of Barbarossa (The Great Patriotic War)?

What would it have been like to have lived in China during the Taiping revolt of the 1850s?

All three of those traumatic events cost the lives of tens of millions of people in countless episodes of human-created violence.

And what about natural disasters, such as droughts, famines, floods, hurricanes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions? For instance, what would it have been like to have lived in Pompeii or Herculaneum in 79 A.D., when Mount Vesuvius erupted, in Indonesia when Tambora erupted in 1815, or in 1883 when Krakatoa erupted?

I don't really know, not in a visceral or empathic way, and I'd prefer not to. That doesn't mean that I have no interest in the history of such times, places, and events. I do, and I've read about those and many other traumatic experiences that human beings suffered throughout recorded history.

Many such catastrophic events have occurred within my lifetime — too many to list — but they didn't touch me. As a white, middle-class American born in the middle of the 20th century, I was insulated, effectively shielded against the kind of calamities to which I refer. Scary events that happened closer to home, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 or 9/11 in 2001, were experiences I watched on television, without any direct involvement.

The basic truism here seems to be that whatever happens to others doesn't touch us much — especially others beyond our personal lives — as long as we don't see it. Out of sight, out of mind. It's happening to *them*, not *us*, and we tend to remain blissfully unaware, sometimes stubbornly so. And this goes beyond just human suffering and death. Decimation of animal and plant species is ongoing, yet very few of us are concerned or actively involved in trying to change it. The serious problem of diminishing bee colonies has been the subject of moderate reporting in the media, but how many of us know that the entire realm of insects is steadily declining? Relatively few. The population of many insect species is down substantially, sometimes resulting in extinction. This is the

direct result of modern human civilization — industry, agriculture, pollution, pesticides, and ecological habitat destruction. Sure, many Americans know that the Amazon rain forest is shrinking precipitously, but as a nation we tend to not think about what has happened and continues to occur routinely (I might say systematically) throughout the American west. Concern and activism seem to be limited to environmentalists and academic specialists whose warnings are going largely unheeded.

Perhaps this is inevitable. Maybe it's just too much to expect that human beings can or will look beyond our obvious and immediate self-interest. The vast majority of us have our hands full just trying to keep body and soul together. And yet, most of us are complicit in the destruction of the natural world by our oh-so-clever species. We drive cars, use the electrical grid, and eat the food of industrial agriculture, to mention only a few of the habits to which Americans are collectively addicted.

Who among us can claim complete sanity? No one I know, and that includes me. Anxiety and derangement are afoot throughout the land, and everyone suffers from them to some extent.

In 1992, President George H. W. Bush famously declared that "*the American way of life is not up for negotiation.*" Oh, yeah? If that's true — and, judging from everything that's happened since, it seems to be — then we're in deep trouble. Of course we are, up to our eyeballs. Cockeyed optimists always believe that the glass is half full. I don't.

At this time in America, where the lurking shadow of our longstanding madness is being vomited up in such extreme ways, looking at the Big Picture is very difficult for most people. To go beyond our deranged politics, culture wars, and infighting about the pandemic to be thoughtful about where we're headed stretches most people too far. The urgency of the 24/7 news cycle forces anything other than the most momentary melodramas off the headline. Social media mostly just adds to the cacophony. We tend to focus only on the immediate future. I don't see any solution for this myopia.

I understand that we have so many problems on our plates that dealing with everything at once is impossible. I'd also suggest that the vast majority of people are well-intentioned and do the best they can. But good intentions fall far short. This is why I keep writing that things are going to get a lot worse before they get better. That's the bad news (from my admittedly biased perspective).

The good news is that the future is and has always been very mysterious and impossible to predict accurately. Sure, we can take whatever we know or believe about the present and extend that into the future, but only as possible trends, not as certainties.

I take a certain comfort in that.