

Mea Culpa

by Bill Herbst

Version 1.2 (posted on 29 December 2020)

© 2020 by the author, all rights reserved

For my commentary of this last week in what has been a truly dreadful year (and, I fear, may turn out to be a mere sneak preview of even more terrible years to come), I want to expand on a topic I've been writing about recently. I've been alluding to it and circling around it, but this week I want to nail it. I also want to make this commentary more personal — about as personal as it gets. After you read the piece, it won't take a genius to figure out that I wrote it for myself, but also on behalf of a very large group of people, as their representative, so to speak.

To all future generations of human beings (which includes the frightening possibility that before too long there might be none), I want to apologize:

I'm sorry.

I have been (and continue to be) complicit in the destruction of the world. I have been an active, if not altogether willing, participant in Death Culture. It's not that I wanted to live that way — I didn't — but I've done so in spite of my intentions.

When I was young, I could see that we (meaning humanity) were headed down a dangerous road. I was born in the aftermath of World War II, in the year that the Soviets got The Bomb (1949). The civilization I was born into that was the cumulative result of what humans had collectively created appeared to me (even as a small child) to be on very questionable footing.

This wasn't what I was told by those older than myself. While most adults I knew didn't talk to me about civilization — they seemed very busy working and doing "adult" things — those who did tended almost exclusively to speak about America and civilization in glowing terms, lauding them both as among the greatest achievements of humanity. These older people included most of my teachers in primary and secondary school, and even into college. And yet, their praise didn't gibe with much of what I saw in the world and felt inside me. Something seemed terribly wrong, but who was I to question the way things were? At the very least, I hadn't created it.

As I grew up, I discovered that not everyone felt so positive about society. Within the general praise for America and civilization (or at least passive

acceptance of them), were dissident voices. These voices varied in tone and authority. They were sometimes calm and wise, but other times angry and strident. I gravitated in their direction.

Throughout my early years, another problem impinged on my view of the world. I was personally deranged. In effect, I was crazy. Oh, I hid it as well as I could, but the world was never my oyster, and — assaulted as I was by my own inner demons — my childhood was far from happy. At that time, I thought that my insanity was exceptional, that I was among a small percentage of seriously damaged humans. I now know how wrong I was. At 71, I see that everyone is crazy (at least all the people I know are). Much of what American culture sees as perfectly acceptable strikes me as insane.

By the time I reached the end of my adolescence, I was thoroughly radicalized. That was the late 1960s, and I had morphed into an avid participant in the alternative subcultures of that era — spirituality, political activism, rock and roll. Not only was I committed to “curing” my personal insanity, but I looked for a better way to live with and among others.

Well, almost none of that went as I’d hoped. 50 years later, I’m still crazy, but I’ve matured some and learned to accept and live with my demons. Since I failed to rid myself of them, I ended up building a zoo for them inside my psyche. That serves at least to constrain them. I visit my demons often, however. They’re part of me, and in a weird way, I love them.

As for finding a better way to live in society and the world, I’ve tried and, to some extent, succeeded. I’ve avoided participating in the Empire as much as possible. I’ve haven’t killed anyone and — compared to many Americans — have lived frugally. What I’ve done to make a living in the marketplace has been meaningful and probably qualifies as right livelihood, or close enough to it.

I’ve attempted to treat myself and others with kindness and compassion, although that’s a continuing challenge. While I haven’t transcended my ego in any authentic or profoundly spiritual way — I’m sure as hell no bodhisattva — I’ve chosen the slow inner work of true humility rather than the narcissism and self-aggrandizement so common in modern society, especially here in America. Inside myself I’ve attempted to increase Us and decrease Them. So, all that is pretty good.

Still, I regard too many of my efforts as sketchy and piecemeal at best. If I’d had my druthers, I might have lived like a deep ecologist in a rustic, hand-built log cabin in the woods or on the shore, with no electricity or internet, gardening and fishing for sustenance. But no. That road would have required more resources than I had — more money, more skills, more strength, and more opportunity.

At 71, old, damaged, and partially disabled, I sit in front of a computer all day long, surrounded by many other products of modern technology, including a smart phone and a big-ass flat-screen TV, no doubt surveilled by the state and manipulated by corporate algorithms. So yes, I'm definitely on the electrical grid, an avid user of fossil fuels. I don't drive much anymore, but I still own a 21-year-old car. I don't eat fast food and have groceries delivered now, but it's still your typical agri-business fare. I shop online from Amazon. God help me.

Time and again, I come back to the hard and undeniable fact that I'm a creature of my times, perhaps not as completely as some others, but enough to be more than a little disappointed with myself.

So, my apologies to future generations: *I'm so sorry about, well, everything.* I can't claim to have lived as a paragon of virtue, and I'm sadly complicit in the mess we're leaving you.

All I can say in my defense is that I did the best I could given my endowments and abilities, and that I would have liked to do more and better. At this point in my life, the spiritual and practical work still in front of me as death approaches is more about acceptance than change. That will have to be enough.