

Civilization

by Bill Herbst

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The cheerleaders for civilization — and there are many of them — claim that it is the only thing that stands between us and barbarity. In my opinion, they are wrong. Civilization *is* barbarity.

When I went to elementary school in the 1950s, I was taught that civilization, most especially the modern, 20th-century American variety, but also the earlier forms that arose in Europe during and after “the Enlightenment” or “Age of Reason,” along with selected parts of much older civilizations from the Far East, the Mediterranean, and northern Africa, was the greatest thing since sliced bread. All the best parts of human endeavor, from art to invention, were the product of civilization. Yeah, there were some downsides, but these were of less consequence, and anyway, we were gradually fixing them. Basically, I was told in no uncertain terms that civilization was wonderful. It was the shining crown of human creation.

What my teachers did *not* tell me was that civilization was almost wholly responsible for war, poverty, and slavery, since none of these had existed in any significant measure before the development of civilization. All three may have been sporadically present in human life before civilization arose, but mostly as anecdotal or isolated experiences that were limited in scope, rather than the sacrosanct, deep-seated, and effectively permanent institutions they later became once civilization had taken root and spread around the world.

Civilization was also the originating source of money, which may or may not be the root of all evil, but is most certainly a serious impediment to the expression of humanity’s kinder, gentler, and more angelic facets. Commerce is good — it’s the lifeblood of human society — but money is not required for commerce to operate. Trade in goods and services will flourish with or without money. Ownership in general and money in particular are powerful stimuli for humanity’s dark shadow aspects. Not that greed or cruelty require money to rear their heads in human actions and relationships, but those loathsome qualities tend to bloom like poisonous flowers in the presence of money, which is an all-too-potent fertilizer.

Part of why I was not taught these truths about civilization is because humans are admonished to not shit where they eat. The vast majority of those of us who are alive today are members of civilization in some standing — good or bad, greater or lesser, happy or not. We all feed at the trough of what civilization

produces and provides. So, who are we to bite the hand that feeds us? This sentiment is powerful despite the fact that civilization is two-handed. Yes, the first hand feeds us, and may even stroke or pet us lovingly, but the other hand smacks us down, subjecting some of us (and at times many or even most of us) to inhumanely harsh treatment, often at the hands of other members of civilization, either those who are pissed off or those who are most privileged. This cruel treatment results in deprivation, injury or — all too frequently — even death. The Biblical phrase about the Lord might well be applied here: *Civilization giveth, and civilization taketh away.*

The deaths caused directly or indirectly by civilization may be our own or others', since civilization is, in some respects, like the dragon eating its own tail, but the deaths of note are also and even more routinely those of non-human living creatures, both individual members of other species, and sometimes even the entire species (through artificially-accelerated extinction). Passenger pigeons are an example of a once flourishing and abundant species that was driven to extinction in relatively short order by human civilization. Each year in America, *55 billion animals* are slaughtered as food for humans. This kind of death — among non-human creatures — occurs because human civilization is absolutely ravenous in co-opting the entire ecosphere of earthly life for its own purposes. There seems to be no limit to our hunger to devour.

The astonishing, complex, and elegant interdependence of life that built up on the surface of this garden planet over the past two billion years, both on land and in the oceans, finally produced humanity as its apotheosis, seemingly the pinnacle of evolution. And for a while — about 200,000 years, give or take — we were that. At least that case could be made. No, we didn't appear to be dominant or even particularly special for most of that history, but we were oh-so-clever in using our big brains to compensate for and overcome our physical limitations. In this regard, we were unchallenged.

Sadly, about 12,000 years ago, the human species took a seriously wrong turn on the evolutionary path. Our biological evolution had taken us a long way in its slow and steady fashion. But then social evolution took over, and things went haywire.

Although we can feel fairly certain about where and when the turn occurred, we don't have a firm grasp on all the particulars of how it happened, the sequence of developments that sent us careening away from the flow of natural life. Was it the onset of agriculture through the growing of grains that could be stored as surplus food? Was it the domestication of other animals as beasts of burden to facilitate our work (oxen), accelerate our movement (horses), and provide us with meat (cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens)? Was it the beginning of our living in larger groups in permanent settlements (city-states), rather than the small, kinship-based, nomadic communities that had formerly and for so long provided us with a relatively sound basis for culture and society?

Each of these powerfully transformative conditions obviously played a role, but we are uncertain about how they combined to reach critical mass. All we know for sure is the result, the final outcome.

That final outcome is what we now refer to as *civilization*. And it marks the dividing line between the human species as an integrated part of Nature's beautiful, interwoven, fertile web — natural, material life creating ever more varied and vital life — and our current role as the destroyer of all life on earth, the most profoundly toxic factor threatening Gaia. How ironic that Nature created its own assassin from within.

Many people will no doubt disagree with my assessment. They might feel uncomfortable being confronted with such a negative judgment about our species, especially since they themselves harbor no bad intentions toward anything, including Nature and most of her sentient and even semi-sentient life-forms. They mean no harm to the earth, and my harsh suggestion that we humans are the greatest threat to life on earth is, quite probably, very unpleasant to even consider. I can easily imagine that some people might regard it as an insult, although I don't mean it that way.

Rather than rudely knocking us off our pedestal, I'm suggesting that the building of that pedestal was wrong-headed from the start, although we didn't realize it at the time (how could we?) and have only very recently begun to be aware of the dreadful repercussions. In other words, civilization seemed like a good idea, even a great idea, when it began. We simply couldn't see where it would lead.

A large percentage of the American population has been immersed in the modern religion of science and technology, marinated in the belief that those two related endeavors are magically powerful. They recognize that something is wrong — actually, many things — but they have faith that the technology will provide workable solutions to allow us and the earth to continue as we have previously.

To these people, I would say, *"I agree without reservation that science and technology are immensely powerful, but not in the benign way you believe. I'm very sorry, but I think you've been sold a bill of goods. Techno-evangelism is a product of advertising, and it's a lie. The sad truth is that neither science nor technology can save us from the damage we've wrought on ourselves and the world."*

Then too, there is at least a small but potent segment of the thinking public that would vehemently disagree with my assessment, but on a very different basis. They are people who embrace Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) and the Singularity.

To some extent, these are the people who created the first Turing Machine, transistors and microchips, the personal computer and its coding languages, the Internet and World Wide Web. They may be some of the same people who built

the rockets that took men to the moon, although I think they are probably not the same people who are now talking about colonizing Mars.

What the "A.I. people" might say to me in response is this: *"Humans were always endowed with the capacity to be the stepping-stone to a new life-form on the earth. Perhaps that was 'intended,' perhaps not, but either way, we've been headed for some time now toward the creation of a Brave New World. That new world will necessarily require the extinction of many of the earthly life-forms that have existed for a long time, including human beings. Viewed from the perspective of Gaia, there's nothing tragic about this. It has been inevitable for quite awhile. What's different now is that the end game is in sight."*

I have admitted more than once in my commentaries that I am a Luddite. I say that with neither apology nor pride. I don't regard it as a failing or a virtue. It's just how I've always been. I suppose it means that, even though I see myself as a revolutionary, I'm more of a de facto reactionary than a true progressive. My politics have always leaned strongly to the left, but my evolutionary sensibilities are quite conservative. I believe that much of significant value in human life is not particularly easy, convenient, or pleasant, and that, in our headlong pursuit of ease, convenience, and pleasure, we have lost a great deal. To put it into poetic terms, I think we humans have made way too many deals with the devil. We have, in effect, sold our souls for a pittance: cars, televisions, smart phones, fast food, travel and tourism, all the presumed goodies of modern civilization.

And yes, I get it that all those things are really seductive for human beings (myself included). We are all creatures of our times, and the times I've lived through here in America over almost 73 years have been ridiculously bountiful. In terms of the contrasts between hard labor and all comforts of convenience, I've had it very easy. This has been so despite my not being wealthy. I enjoyed the privilege of being white and middle-class during the period where America was aggressively skimming much of the cream off the entire world's milk. That's coming to an end, of course, so many of the younger generations of Americans are understandably more hard-pressed than I was as a second-wave Boomer.

The upshot to all this is my admission that, despite my own habits and proclivities, I am no lover of civilization. I will continue, of course, to ride that beast until I shuffle off this mortal coil (or maybe the beast will continue to ride me), but I'm not all that happy about it. Needless to say, I won't be around to see if the techno-evangelists are proven correct, nor whether the A.I./Singularity people get the last laugh, but then probably few of us will be.

Maybe Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos will colonize Mars. Yeah, fat chance of that...