

Nothing New Under the Sun

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Let me begin by rudely dismissing all the people in the media who assert the optimistic but false view that things in America aren't so bad, and that all of us who stubbornly insist that collapse is underway are not only guilty of a disservice to the body politic through our unconscionable negativity, but really have our heads up our asses. Nope. They're wrong. I won't protest that our heads are screwed on straight — I don't know anyone who isn't fallible, damaged, and vulnerable to varying degrees of derangement. But that doesn't necessarily mean that we're crazy. We're not. Or, at least, we're not so completely crazy that what we see is entirely wrong. What the Cassandras among us see — which is basically that modern civilization has overshot horribly, suicidally, and is now coming apart at the seams in a myriad of interconnected ways — is indeed happening. To not see that requires truly impressive degrees of ignorance or willful denial.

I would love to be wrong about this, but I'm as certain as I could be that it's the starry-eyed optimists who are the fools.

I depart, however, from many of my doomer compatriots in at least one significant way, which is the theme of this commentary. Some of my compatriots apparently believe that the insanity that is overtaking us from inside out is a recent or relatively new phenomenon and represents a tragic fall from grace, as if we had been on the right track, but then lost our way. I do not agree with any of those presumptions.

My thesis is simple: The disintegration of even the pretense of sanity that has occurred in America over my lifetime of seven-plus decades, has accelerated steadily over the past 40 years, and has recently reached a point of astonishing self-delusion at nearly every level of our society, is not new. Heck, it's not even unusual. It's just more plainly visible, more out front, and more bald-faced now than in the past. Basically, the way people are in America is not fundamentally different from how we always have been.

Maybe we aren't exactly the same as we were a century or two ago, but we're close enough for horseshoes. A crude or rough equivalency holds: Crazy then, crazy now. This is so longstanding that it's difficult for me to think of it as tragic. The difference between the crazy of the present and the crazy of the past is that in the past we maintained a collective agreement or "surface illusion" about our being a "liberal democracy." That agreement also contained a codicil or secondary agreement that we would de-emphasize or at least keep hidden

the more monstrous layers of our psyches and our nation. That agreement, which amounted to a kind of posturing, accentuated the kinder and more compassionate ideals we supposedly held while masking the deeper and harsher truths about who we really were (and still are).

All this is intimately tied to the notion of an American Empire. That ambition was with us from the discovery and colonization of the western hemisphere by Europeans at the end of the 15th century. It swept across the North American continent for the next three centuries, went international at the end of the 19th century, and was realized in full scope by America's graduation to hegemonic world leadership at the end of World War II. We really needed to believe that we were wonderful, loving people, and not just grifters, thieves, and mass murderers. So, we created the illusion of the agreement amongst ourselves.

Human beings have trouble with paradox and ambivalence. We want good to be separate from evil, clearly distinguishable, and with no crossover. We don't like the fact that good and evil intertwine in reality, with evil often masquerading as good, nor that both potentials exist within our own individual psyches. The agreement we made in America was designed to resolve those dilemmas by simplifying them and making things black and white. We were "the good guys." We wore the white hats. In truth, though, that was an illusion, just a game of obfuscation, misdirection, and denial. Amazingly enough, it worked pretty well for quite awhile, almost two centuries.

One way we used this illusion was to try to fool others outside of America, to encourage foreign nations and peoples to believe that America was indeed "the Shining City on the Hill," and complying with our insistence that the American Empire's dominant role in the world wasn't such a bad idea. More subtly, however, we maintained the illusion of being righteous, sincere, and heartfelt good guys to fool ourselves, to keep us focused as Americans on ideals we didn't actually believe in and, with occasional exceptions had never truly been committed to. Oh sure, a small percentage of us really did take the ideals seriously, but a greater percentage of us didn't, at least not for anyone but our families and close friends — whatever select group we considered to be "us." When push came to shove, though, most of us threw the ideals under the bus and went with our shadows — *"I feather my own nest, and I don't care at whose expense that happens."* Sadly, that's what "freedom" means to all too many Americans — carte blanche permission to plunder, pillage, and steal.

The surprising irony here is that we actually put some of the ideals we claimed to espouse into practice throughout two centuries of American history, and we did so in ways that elevated our culture toward less evil and greater good. There were moments when America did indeed stand out as better than most of the world's other societies. One might think that we would have noticed these salutary social effects and either kept the ideal practices in place or perhaps even added more along the way, but every time we enshrined any of these ideals into the law of the land, some of us — typically the wealthiest and most privileged among us — immediately began looking for and finding ways to undercut or even dismantle and overturn them. America has a sad history

of achieving seemingly impossible advances in human society, but then undoing those victories through corruption, criminality, and malfeasance.

What ideals am I referring to? Well, I could list them, but I don't think I need to. We know what the ideals are, and they all align to point in the same direction, namely, toward the creation of a society through legal governance that takes measures to insure that the monstrous shadow aspects of human nature (which are part of every human psyche, whether covert or overt) are not given free rein to damage the body politic by causing suffering to vulnerable individuals or groups within the culture or by harming the society as a whole. Add to that the elephant in the room, the fact that the greater good involves more than just convenience and toys for humans, and not merely the reduction of cruelty amongst ourselves, but also the thoughtful effort to preserve the wondrous abundance and balanced diversity of life on this garden planet — not out of misplaced superiority, but from the humble recognition that doing so helps to insure our own future.

Who determines what practices might be judged damaging or harmful, and thus be worth restraining? Why, we do, of course. Despite what some people believe, the world we live in is not the creation of fate, destiny, or chance. Each of those factors may have a vote or a role to play, but none possesses anything close to total power in giving reality its shape and form. On the earth, our collective intentions as humans play a central role in creating our world.

Where our intentions come from is an enigmatic mystery. Most ideas that grow into powerful movements in civilization appear to take shape initially within the zeitgeist — the invisible ocean that surrounds human consciousness. After a long period of gestation, ideas become ready to birth into the world. At that point, many individuals begin expressing them at the same time. Few, if any, of the most potent developments are the creation and product of a single human individual. Instead, ideas ripen like fruit on the vine, waiting to be plucked by humans driven by hunger and desire.

In addition, ideas are subject to the technology of the times. Before the printing press, certain ideas would never have gained traction. In recent history, the development of social media has played a decisive role in re-shaping public discourse. Sadly, the effect has been to coarsen dialogue, to move away from thoughtfulness and consideration of differing points of view. This has been a major part of our dismantling of the agreement to maintain a common, if superficial, point of view.

Our previous mass falsehood (posing as the “good guys”) has been supplanted by many other, even more toxic falsehoods (silos, echo chambers, scapegoating, and general hatred). Of course, social media isn't the only development that contributed to the disintegration of our former agreement. I can't even count how many nails have been pounded into America's coffin lid over my lifetime, with hammers all wielded by Americans, but social media has been a notable culprit in preparing our funeral, along with foolhardy wars, mega corporations, and the wholesale transfer of wealth upwards into the coffers of the ultra-rich.

Inadvertently, we have approved, authorized, and even blessed the release of our inner demons from their cages inside our psyches. They are now free to roam the land, wreaking havoc — not only on others with whom we disagree, but on ourselves as well.

When I assert that there is “nothing new under the sun,” I’m referring to the basic components of human conflict, whether intrapersonal (meaning struggles between various facets of the self) or interpersonal (meaning disagreements with other human beings). Narrative artists tell us that there are only a few basic stories, and we re-tell them over and over, just in different variations. In much the same way, there are only a few basic human issues that cause conflict, whether within us or between us.

Both madness and sanity are ancient and archetypal. There’s nothing new and different about either state of consciousness.

What is different now than a hundred years ago (or a thousand years ago, for that matter) is where we are in the game. This is not the first inning. Heck, it’s not even the seventh-inning stretch. And no, I’m not going to say that it’s the bottom of the ninth with two outs. It’s even more extreme than that. We’re already in overtime, and Team Madness has already scored a shitload of goals since the end of regulation time. Meanwhile, Team Sanity is still in the field, struggling to play defense, but doing so very badly. The goals against are mounting up. And yes, I realize that I’m mixing my sports metaphors here, from baseball to soccer, but you get the drift.

What’s great about the soccer metaphor is that in overtime — called “extra time” in soccer — the players don’t know exactly how much time has been granted. What’s not so great about any of the sports metaphors is that humanity’s situation isn’t really a game, and anyway, we’ve already lost. We forfeited any chance we had of winning long ago.

What we’re playing out — not in metaphor, but in reality — are the last decades (years?) of life in human civilization as we expected it to be.

But even that isn’t new. Sure, the end of life as we thought it would be is new to us, but endings of this type are nothing new to the earth. Species arise, live, and die. They thrive for awhile and then go extinct. So do civilizations. Our civilization is now coming to an end. What we don’t know yet is whether the end of our civilization will also mean the end of our species.

To pick up the soccer metaphor again, perhaps the ref will signal the end of extra time (and with it, the end of the game) while some of us are still in the field. If so, then maybe those who remain on the pitch can pick up the pieces and start over.

As always, time will tell.