

Nothing to Say

by Bill Herbst

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I begin the new year with an odd post. Nothing to say? What kind of title is that? Does this mean that after posting a commentary here on my web site each and every week for the past five years that I've reached the bottom of my own well, come up dry, and thus will no longer post a regular short essay on a weekly basis, but instead only as the spirit moves me whenever I have something I consider worth offering in writing? Well, no, not officially. In other words, this post might turn out to be a swan song of sorts, but it might not. Something may be different from this point on, but it's hard to say right now what that is.

Rather than being a clear indication of emptiness or exhaustion, the title of this commentary is meant more as my take on the current state of the zeitgeist, at least as I feel it for myself and see it in the world. When I began writing this piece (on Sunday evening, January 2nd), I thought I'd entitle it, "No Solutions." That was to be the substantive theme — my perception that none of the people in power who are charged with the messy business of running modern civilization have any good answers to address the terrible messes we humans have created or practical solutions that could produce a positive impact to alleviate them.

All the solutions I've heard or read about over the past decades boil down to vain attempts to keep a bad game going. They're all intended to allow humans to continue living in the status quo of modern civilization's toxic dreams and deluded fantasies without suffering the nasty consequences of reality biting back. None of these so-called "solutions" will work to save us, of course, since they're all mere band aids covering gaping and fatal wounds. Out of sight, out of mind. It's kindergarten metaphysics 101 for spiritual babies: *Think only good thoughts and nothing bad will happen.* Oh yeah? Sorry, I don't think so.

As I've written often, electric cars and wind farms solve nothing in the overall scheme of things and create even more problems by their implementation.

Then, from the storage vault of ancient memory banks in my mind, the phrase "nothing to say" wafted up to my consciousness as it was sung by Ian Anderson in a song released as the second track on Jethro Tull's third album, "Benefit." This was way back in 1970 — still relatively early in the band's long career, before the quirky and sometimes snarky Anderson and his various musical mates in Tull had fully settled into their classical/folk/prog rock niche. "Nothing to Say" isn't one of Jethro Tull's hits. I wouldn't call the song obscure, exactly, but it tends to be buried amidst the general catalog of Tull's/Anderson's early albums as a somewhat nondescript entry.

I've published lyrics for various songs over the years in my commentaries, from the Rolling Stones to Pete Seeger, and I'll do so again here, but this time I'll also include a YouTube link to let readers listen to an audio mp3 of the original song itself.

Nothing to Say

by Ian Anderson
lyrics © BMG Rights Management

*Everyday there's someone asking "What is there to do?"
Should I love or should I fight, is it all the same to you?
No I say I have the answer proven to be true,
but if I were to share it with you, you would stand
to gain and I to lose.*

*Oh I couldn't bear it so I've got nothing to say.
Nothing to say.*

*Every morning pressure forming all around my eyes.
Ceilings crash, the walls collapse, broken by the lies
that your misfortune brought upon us and I won't disguise them.
So don't ask me will I explain, I won't even begin to tell you why.*

*No, just because I have a name well I've got nothing to say.
Nothing to say.*

*Climb a tower of freedom, paint your own deceiving sign.
It's not my power to criticize or to ask you to be blind
to your own pressing problem and the hate you must unwind.
So ask of me no answer there is none that I could give you wouldn't find.*

*I went your way ten years ago and I've got nothing to say.
Nothing to say.*

Here's a link to the audio of the song itself as a video on YouTube. It's pretty standard early-70s guitar-based riff rock, but the lyrics are interesting:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1Pzk_UYnos

(There are numerous other songs entitled "Nothing to Say" on YouTube, including one by Soundgarden, the Seattle grunge and heavy metal band from the 1990s, as well as other, more recent entries from hip-hop artists with whom I'm entirely unfamiliar — H.E.A.T. and Y.V.E. 48 with LissA. None of those are my age generation or my preferred historical genres of music. That's not to dis any of them, just to acknowledge that they aren't floating inside my head...)

Admittedly, Jethro Tull's lyrics to this song aren't a perfect parallel to how I feel these days. First off, unlike the song's narrator (presumably Ian Anderson), I don't have an answer that I'm withholding. Hell, if I knew something that might

work to turn things around and counter Death Culture, I'd offer it up in a heartbeat. I wish I did, but I don't.

Second, unlike the last line of the song, I didn't go someone else's way "ten years ago." I'm not sure what that line of the song means — probably some anecdote from Anderson's past — but it doesn't ring true for me. I've been far from the mainstream for as long as I can remember. I tried as a child to be dutifully obedient and embrace all the core cultural narratives and memes that formed the main current of the American zeitgeist in the 1950s, but I was cut from a different cloth and gave up those failed efforts at being in the fold early on in adolescence. I was not destined to be a cheerleader for America and have spent the bulk of my life as a pretty harsh critic of what I consider this country's serious delusions.

These days, there's a great deal of talk about how divided the American public is, with seemingly endless references to extreme partisanship, social media silos, and the complete unwillingness to listen to anyone not on one's own "team." I don't see that as a new or recent phenomenon, however. Over the past 50 years, my experience has been that almost no one who drank the standard American Kool-Aid of "Rah-Rah-America, We're Number One" was ever willing to listen or consider another perspective, especially any that were less than strongly positive about the U.S. and more pessimistic than optimistic.

The hot stew of jingoistic beliefs that include American Exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny, and Ronald Reagan's picture of the U.S. as the Shining City on the Hill are immensely powerful in this country. Finally, all that flag-waving, teary-eyed patriotism boils down to the central, core feeling that Americans have been, are now, and always will be "the Good Guys." We wear the white hats, God loves us, and anyone who disagrees is a traitor who can jolly well pack up and leave. By extension, these attitudes also tend to include an underbelly of racist sentiment through white superiority (either veiled or overt), an authoritarian insistence on law and order that places property above people, and the fervent embrace of corporate capitalism as a religion and consumer culture as a way of life.

One might assume that such people feel that everything in America is hunky-dory. Not so at all. No, they see much in our country and culture that they don't like and want changed. But, whether from the radical Left or the reactionary Right, these cheerleaders for America believe strongly in the myths of our essential goodness as a people and a country that go hand-in-hand with the pro-American propaganda narratives historically taught in elementary schools. They also tend to have profound and almost unquestioning faith — sometimes based in science and other times in religion — that solutions can and will be found to almost magically solve our problems. If they imagine an apocalypse on the way (and many do), they're likely to see it not as devastation and suffering, but instead as a moral cleansing to purge psychic sickness from the body politic.

As far as I can tell, the Americans who identify with all or part of what I've just described comprise a large segment of this country's population, perhaps even a majority. In my personal experience, these people are not and never have been the least bit receptive to any fundamental criticisms of American goodness. I don't know if they're in denial or if they simply regard such criticisms as heresies or attacks. Either way, pointing out to them any of the thousands of examples of cruel, violent, or otherwise despicable behavior on the part of Americans throughout our history — even that done by some Americans to other Americans — falls on deaf ears. The armor of denial or fear of negativity is so strong that such allegations (most of which are factual and well-documented) don't even leave a scratch on their armor, much less make a dent. It's water off a duck's back.

Now, as we move into the fourth year of this tumultuous and disturbing decade (the 2020s), my perception is that we are less in a crossroads than an impasse. The road ahead appears increasingly unnavigable, though not so much blocked as obscured. The reforms we tried over the past 30 years to convince ourselves that everything was OK didn't actually work well at all, but they allowed the status quo to continue. Those strategies — including a de facto austerity policy for hundreds of millions of Americans here at home, endless wars (both real and proxy) as ongoing violent efforts to maintain American hegemony, and all the central bank shenanigans to move wealth upward while striving to keep a lid on economic disaster — are unlikely to continue maintaining even the illusion of stability.

The barn is on fire — the horses have broken down the doors and run away. Much of our value (meaning treasure) has been lost, and many of our values (meaning standards of conduct) have been perverted and gutted, so that there's little left to save. We are an Empire headed for collapse. Empires in decline grow increasingly incautious and wildly foolish in the desperate measures they invoke to try to hold onto power. Misadventures in policy become the order of the day and play out one after another. America is there now, revealed by many sad developments, three of which stand out for me in bold relief:

1. COVID-19 and the astonishing fiasco surrounding our utter mismanagement of the pandemic at every stage and at all institutional levels;
2. The War in Ukraine (which we set up) and our increasing obsession with Russia and China as "enemies" rather than simply more vital competitors;
3. The global economy's beginning to come apart at the seams.

OK, I understand that what I've written over the last page and a half may seem to indicate that I still have "something to say." The problem I feel, however, is that I have no viable solutions to any of it, thus "nothing to say."

To be even a little bit conscious and thoughtful these days means dealing with deep sorrow and poignant sadness. I wish that weren't so, but here we are.