

On Becoming a Radical

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I've noticed a shift in my commentaries over the past couple years. Earlier, I tended to keep my personal life separate from and out of my public writing. Now I tend to include it, and sometimes (like today) even to focus on it. Do I consider my life important enough to parade in front of my readers? Not really, but I'm old now, looking back, and thinking that perhaps my experience might resonate with that of my readers. At least I hope so. Anyway, on with the show...

Over my lifetime, there have been five phases or chapters where I've been presented with distinctly different but interconnected elements of society and culture, each of which contributed to my becoming a radical. All these chapters taught me about what I value in society and what I must reject or walk away from, however much I can, either by declining to participate or by challenging the status quo.

The first phase was my early academic achievements. While I was never a truly outstanding student, I qualified early on for membership in the top tier of "smart kids." Along the way of my primary and secondary education, I was offered the social benefits of that, and I was expected to accept those benefits gratefully and dutifully, which I did. However, very soon after getting to college, I found myself reconsidering those "benefits."

My college years were from 1967-1971, which were a turbulent time in society. The disruption of my academic path to success grew out of events happening in both my own social world and in the larger world. Vietnam and the youth subculture in all its forms (psychedelic drugs, sex, rock and roll, commune life, non-religious spirituality, etc.) were primary in my questioning everything about standard American life. Although my academic reconsideration dragged on for a couple of years, I ended up rejecting the presumed benefits, along with the entire pecking order of academia. Having been groomed by the educational system to help maintain the social beehive (as a psychologist), I renounced that heritage and legacy for a very different and less acceptable path (as an astrologer). That decision put an end to the initial chapter. Thankfully, looking back from more than 50 years later, I have no regrets about my choice.

The second phase was my time as a homeowner, briefly in Columbia, Missouri, in the mid-70s, then again in Minneapolis, Minnesota, from the mid-80s until the end of the century. I owned a modest and inexpensive home in each city. This was where I experienced the full seductive weight of wanting to live a middle-class life within which I would enjoy social inclusion and acceptance as normal (rather than marginalization as an unacceptable radical). That period was fleshed

out by my acquisition of numerous credit cards, renovating the two houses, outfitting them with whatever decent quality furniture and decorating could be purchased on the cheap.

At that point, I also began driving used European luxury cars (admittedly, only Saabs rather than Mercedes, BMW, or Lexus, but that was in some ways even better because of the reverse-status quirks of Saabs). However radical I had become, I was still attached in some ways to the American notion of “the good life.” In a sense, owning expensive-when-new higher-status used cars made me feel that I had “arrived,” although that proved to be an economic self-delusion.

During that second phase, I also experienced a shift in my career as a working astrologer. I garnered a Hollywood clientele, spending a month each year for almost a decade visiting Los Angeles and staying amidst the glitterati (although I was never even remotely a member of their club). That time allowed me to observe Hollywood and the entertainment biz from the inside — from behind the curtain, so to speak. On the one hand, the period was quite satisfying as wish fulfillment after an entire life spent as a TV/movie fan, but, on the other hand, it was also a stern lesson, a serious warning about how fucked-up ego is as a guiding principle for ambition in life. I received this lesson in part from observing the people I met, but also from critical self-reflection about my own motives and attachments.

Worsened by my chronically lousy physical health, the two decades from the 1980s to the end of the century eventually resulted in psychological and social collapse. I suffered financial ruin and formal bankruptcy as part of a terrible decade of dreadful purgatory. In this period, I truly believed that my life was over. The culminating event of that awful decade was a hemorrhagic stroke that should have killed me, but didn't (obviously, or I wouldn't be here writing this...)

Then, almost miraculously, my luck suddenly turned. I was given a reprieve from suffering. Starting in 2008, I spent nine years of very privileged and relatively happy life in the small coastal town of Florence, Oregon, living amidst well-to-do retirees in a ridiculously beautiful oceanside setting. This period of renewal brought me a much more nuanced lesson about modern American culture than my earlier Hollywood foray had shown me, in that it demonstrated on a day-to-day, real-life basis exactly how the economically privileged (not the ultra-out-of-sight rich, but those in the managerial tiers below that) live invisibly right alongside (or maybe a couple blocks away from) the rest of us, but with all the many benefits an economically unjust society can confer.

When my decade in Florence came to an end in 2017 (by circumstances far beyond my control rather than by any personal choice), I moved back to Columbia, Missouri, returning to the scene of the radical roots of my youth (1968-78), where the fifth (and presumably final) seduction and teaching began with my mother's death in 2018 at the ripe old age of 96, followed by the financial inheritance — modest but meaningful — that I received from her. That family inheritance has allowed me at least temporarily the questionable largesse to live less frugally than ever before and buy literally whatever I want. The good news about this is that I'm no longer struggling through the stress of

day-in and day-out financial anxiety and forced frugality. The bad news is that resisting the seduction of bullshit consumer culture is much more difficult.

Other ways to understand my life journey offer chapter narratives that may diverge from this one. For instance, my experience around intimate relationships, music, and astrology each have their own schedules. Usually, though, the chapters of these different facets share a resonance in their timing. When one facet shifts, the others tend to change with it, though not necessarily for any obvious reasons. The analysis of this particular commentary illuminates my political and cultural education.

One of the take-aways of this commentary is the idea that when we think we're finished, when we feel like we're done, cooked, and screwed by our own folly, life can still intervene and extend a helping hand. Even after terrible failures — whether self-generated or acts of God, Fate, or Destiny — we may still be given another chance to make good of ourselves. I certainly have been. Obviously, no one gets out of here alive, and we all face the inevitable ending of our lives. But the journey is often full of surprises.

The cumulative effect of all five chapters of the ongoing "education" I've written about here has been to convince me that my radical stance of rejecting most of mainstream American culture is now and always was absolutely correct. At the age of 73, I feel certain about very few things, but one of them is that my longstanding social radicalism has been demonstrated (I might say proven) to be correct. I think it was entirely justified from the start.

The America I see contains millions of well-intentioned and lovely people within it who are worthy of our respect and affection, but — as a society and an empire — America has become Death Culture in all the terrible ways that civilization routinely practices. Further, America is even worse than many previous empires that dominated past epochs of civilization, mainly because the multi-faceted damage and overall devastation wrought by those earlier social cultures was limited in scope by smaller populations and less accessibility to great but toxic power. Also, some of those earlier empires didn't claim so loudly to be "good."

Over my lifetime, America has amassed more power (and used it without restraint or apology) than any other country, culture, or empire I know of. Sadly, that great power has been mostly squandered for short-term control and profit, rather than distributed for the benefit of all humanity. Oh, many Americans insist that we have been generous to a fault, but it's not true. America has been both selfish and short-sighted.

From the mid-20th century through the present, our country has quite literally threatened the future of all existing life on this garden planet. There may be nothing particularly sacred that might be lost by that threat, since life on earth has been purged numerous times in earth's past through previous mass extinctions, a couple of which took Life almost to the point of total and complete annihilation, only to have Life return vibrantly each time. Still, that past resiliency is no guarantee of a positive future. The suffering and devastation that modern civilization has created goes beyond the ordinary, mundane, and banal. It

reaches toward shocking profundity in terms of its foolish wrong-headedness and sheer stupidity. And yet, the irony is that this abject failure may have been the best we could do, given what we had to work with.

The social structures of modern civilization that have remained in place during the recent and precipitous spike in human population upward over the past two centuries, from less than a billion people to now more than eight billion, have made this formerly interesting grand experiment of humanity toxic in the extreme. Our evolutionary potential to elevate life through consciousness by opening the possibility for additional joy while reducing suffering has backfired horribly as we achieved our stunning success as a species. We are, in essence, an algae bloom that will soon go bust, a virus that may mutate itself, perhaps all the way to extinction (but maybe not that far...).

As of the onset of the 2020s, I became more convinced than ever that anyone who believes that modern civilization can be rescued, reformed, and healed from within is seriously and severely deluded. However sincere and well-intentioned, such people are just dead wrong and have their heads up their asses. (Sorry. I know that way of putting it is aggressively insulting, but it's what I see too often for the insult to remain unstated.)

The only viable solution is *collapse* — the breakdown and destruction of this civilization — followed by a restart that may emerge if we're lucky. Should that restart happen, and if we're truly blessed, we might manage to implement very different assumptions than we used over the past 15,000 years. The challenge will be to better harmonize a new civilization with our existing evolutionary biology in ways where each — the progressive memes of society and our genetic proclivities — actually improves the other. Until now, that hasn't been the case. Our ideals have been undone by our hard wiring, which is ill-suited to civilization as we have built it.

I accept that some — perhaps many — people will try nevertheless to save or at least improve our current civilization in whatever time that civilization has left. In my opinion, however, they (we) will fail. I'm not sure whether that means we shouldn't even try, or if we should go ahead and attempt whatever we think best regardless of the lousy odds. Not trying at all doesn't seem to me realistically possible for some of us, even though a significant percentage of the population apparently feels that it's OK to go after what they want for themselves by simply working the system to their advantage, and damn whatever harm results to the collective. This is one of the worst manifestations of the Us-versus-Them dynamic that still rules our actions — too few of Us, and too many of Them.

In every perspective I can apply and through all the various lenses I'm able to look, it appears to me that the collapse of modern civilization is both inevitable and necessary. To the extent that I have any hope remaining, it is for a relatively softer landing that might minimize our collective and individual suffering, as opposed to a sudden and eruptive apocalypse. I may not be around to see which occurs, but time will tell.