

# Can the World be Improved?

by Bill Herbst

*Version 1.4 (posted on 10 October 2017)  
© 2017 by the author, all rights reserved*

Whether or not the world can be improved — if so, how? and if not, then what might we lovingly and productively focus on instead? — is among the questions that emerge from the awkward interface where the metaphysical intersects, interacts, and intermingles with the material. This is where the subtle meets the obvious, and where the extraordinary meets the mundane. Like the shoreline where sea meets land, the intangible and the tangible bump up against each other at a boundary where we experience both, perhaps venturing out upon the ocean, but usually returning to land. From time to time — as we've seen with the recent spate of hurricanes — the apparent solidity and stability of the land, with its seeming security, is revealed to be an illusion when the power of the ocean rises up to engulf us. We work to perfect the material realm, to manipulate and custom-tailor it to our liking, but those efforts are often revealed to be transient and undependable. The same may be true of our intention to perfect society and civilization, which can be all too easily undone by the oceanic tidal forces of the human unconscious.

The question of whether the world can be improved concerns me now in part because of where I am in my own life, and in part because of current circumstances in the collective. The situation between the American and North Korean governments has once again cast over civilization the dark shadow of potentially imminent nuclear war and the holocaust that would ensue. At the same time, as if Texas and Florida weren't enough, the devastation of Puerto Rico from the natural calamity of Hurricane Maria is provocative as well, for all sorts of reasons, not least of which is that it may be a sneak preview of what's coming for the rest of us. Even as I write this, another tropical storm is gearing up in the Gulf of Mexico and threatening to make landfall as a hurricane on America's southern shores.

I presume that such disasters and potential tragedies have always loomed large in humanity's history — at any given moment in time, the likelihood of unspeakable suffering happening somewhere in the world is more than probable (I'd suggest that it's damn near inevitable). One difference between our collective past and present, however, is that, with our having recently wired the globe into a neural net, many of us are now bombarded by the 24/7 news cycle, so the blissful ignorance and protective insulation that characterized our

collective past is considerably diminished, at least for those who wish to know about such events.

I certainly have no trouble understanding why some people choose to ignore the news and occupy their time instead only with their immediate lives through hoped-for fulfillment of their personal wants and needs and those of their close beloveds. Too much exposure to how incredibly screwed up things are in civilization leads sooner or later to information overload, psychological fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and even collapse into deep depression or despair. The juxtaposition of President Trump's all-too-typical self-congratulation about FEMA's recovery efforts ("*everyone says what a great job we're doing*") with the angry and heart-rending pleas by the Mayor of San Juan about the bureaucratic gridlock hampering Puerto Rican aid, relief, and recovery are enough to make me cringe in horror.

Like many of us born in the mid-20th century, I grew up bathed in the narrative (which I now believe to be largely fictional) that painted human civilization as a great and evolving project. Although civilization had frequently stumbled and struggled over its roughly 11,000 year history, we were told that progress was bound to win out, and that the refinement of humanity to bring out fully the better angels of our nature, as well as making life on earth a paradise, was only a matter of time. From one perspective, my life has represented a long and gradual disillusionment from those assumptions.

Two public figures from my parents' generation whom I admired were historian Howard Zinn and novelist Kurt Vonnegut, both of whom have now passed. I loved Zinn for his deep, abiding faith in humanity, as well as his dogged optimism, which is not a characteristic of my own temperament. No matter how bad civilization's past may have been (and it's been pretty terrible, if you ask me), Zinn believed in the longevity of the human spirit, our basic goodness and heart. On the other hand, Vonnegut delighted me for exactly the opposite reason. He was the consummate curmudgeon, but did so with a wry sense of humor and appreciation for the absurd that managed, despite his dim view of humanity, not to throw out the baby with the bath water.

Between those two visions of civilization, it seems to me that Vonnegut's view is proving correct. I wonder what Howard Zinn would say were he alive today about what has transpired over the first decade and a half of the 21st century.

In my adolescence, my initial interest in inner development (or Consciousness Work on Oneself) was sparked by the teachings of G.I. Gurdjieff, who was born in the second half of the 19th century and died in 1949, a month before I was born. Gurdjieff grew up in the Caucasus region of the Russian steppes and, as a young man, explored the Essene and Sufi traditions in central Asia, Tibet, and elsewhere, re-emerging somewhat mysteriously as a spiritual teacher in Russia during World War I. During the 1920s and 1930s, Gurdjieff established and ran

an institute in France called The Prieuré. He attracted a considerable following from the intellectual salons of Europe as well as the upper-middle class in America, achieving a certain notoriety along the way.

Gurdjieff cautioned his followers and students to avoid over-involvement with the problems and challenges of ordinary culture — political movements, social activism, etc. — presumably because, in his view, the advancement of civilization was, if not a completely hopeless effort, at the very best an endeavor of only minimal and temporary productivity that served mainly to distract people from their real work on themselves through development of their consciousness. When I read that as a 15-year-old, it bothered me, and I've been in conflict about it ever since. Is social activism really a waste of one's time? Do concepts such as justice and equality truly not matter? Or is that challenge too great for a species that so often does appear to be deranged, and too often downright bonkers and looney tunes?

In the metaphysical story Gurdjieff told in his book, *All and Everything: Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*, the cause of collective human insanity was ascribed to a "cosmic catastrophe" that affected our local sector of the universe. Human beings were neither the cause nor the focus of the disruption, which occurred at a planetary level, but we suffered negative consequences from its subsequent correction through the implantation of what Gurdjieff called "the organ Kundabuffer," which anesthetized us from the cosmic PTSD and kept us functioning as part of the earth's neural connection to ultimate Consciousness, but (unfortunately) made us crazy as a side effect. Even after the organ Kundabuffer was removed from humanity's biology, we didn't recover and suffered a kind of permanent insanity that continues to this day.

I've learned recently that Gurdjieff didn't invent the myth of Kundabuffer, but borrowed it from stories within various ancient spiritual traditions, including Gnosticism. That's neither here nor there, of course, but it's telling that such a fall-from-grace tale of a tragic mistake that befell humanity through no fault of its own (unlike the Garden of Eden story in Christianity) and purports to explain why human beings are so damaged, disturbed, and insane, turns out to have deep roots that extend back into the early history of occult knowledge.

So, perhaps the world can, or at least could, be improved, but it's just that we humans haven't yet healed or evolved beyond our tragic condition, so we're not likely to be able to achieve it. In this view, we still provide the earth's "receptor skin" — allowing our living planet to receive instructions to do its job in helping the cosmos to maintain its proper evolution, but we poor creatures remain crazy as hell, and at some levels a danger both to ourselves and now even to the biosphere. Gurdjieff's opinion was that our best shot was not to try to improve life on earth or in society and civilization (which are, of course, as crazy as we are), but rather to focus all our efforts toward recovering our sanity by working on ourselves as individuals to heal or correct the damage to our consciousness.

As mythology, I find that story entertaining but not very satisfying. If that's either literally or mythically the way things are, there's not much hope for the species as a whole.

Or consider Buddhism, another spiritual tradition (i.e., a way of understanding reality) that I like and respect, despite the fact the first Noble Truth is distinctly unpleasant, namely, that life inevitably involves suffering. In the Buddhist view of life on earth, experiences in the material realm (through our senses and bodies) are impermanent and ever-changing, including the certainties of illness, aging, decay, and death. But human beings are hard-wired to try to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Our ignorance and attachments are illusory reactions that amplify and exaggerate our suffering, even though it seems all too real to us. That's being caught in what Buddhism calls "the wheel of Samsara."

Buddhism teaches ways to end (or at least diminish) our suffering, but they're all focused on the inner work of releasing attachment, letting go of fear and clinging, not judging, and relaxing into the spacious joy of consciousness that underlies material experience. These abilities are gained by training the mind over a lifetime (or more, if you believe in reincarnation). It's seductive to see Buddhism as passive and uninvolved, but that's not accurate. Buddhism affirms that life is to be lived with all the vitality that our bodies provide, and that our true state is joy, love, compassion, and wisdom.

As for improving the world, Buddhism holds that the very best way to do so (and perhaps the only way that will succeed ultimately) is by eliminating the hatred, fear, and terrible suffering that are so much a part of civilization. It suggests, however, that these improvements start within the self by training the mind to go beyond one's unconscious programming to open the heart and re-connect with the Truth. Nowhere in Buddhism, however, is one advised to ignore suffering, whatever form it takes and wherever it occurs. Christianity has its original sin and forgiveness, whereas Buddhism is less about morality and more about pragmatism: Just do the right thing whenever we can. The right thing needs no justification; it's natural, obvious, and true. If we don't know what the right thing is, then refrain from acting until we do know.

I opened this commentary by asking if the world can be improved. My answer is that I don't know, but it doesn't matter if we can or can't. While we're here, we have to try. That means getting sane. What is sanity? It's more than lucidity, and it's sure as hell more than rationality. Sanity requires open-hearted love, compassion for all sentient beings, willingness to change and acceptance of what we can't change, and refraining from acting out our worst impulses: hatred, violence, and the mistaken belief that family is limited to only a small number of people we happen to care about personally.

The work is right in front of us. We just have to do it.