

Awakenings and Miracles

by Bill Herbst

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Throughout our history, human beings have experienced spiritual awakenings. By “awakenings,” I mean realizations that may be gradual, as in a progressive accumulation of insight, or sudden, as in the metaphorical flash of lightning that changes everything. Either way, the result is an increase in consciousness that allows more truthful perception and accurate understanding of life. Different spiritual traditions have differing names for these awakenings: epiphany, satori, enlightenment, etc. Certain traditions have numerous categories for particular types of “awakened states,” each with its own name and precise definition.

For myself, I think of all awakenings as steps on the path to maturity. I like the word *maturity* because it’s so basic and grounded. There’s nothing arcane, esoteric, or other-worldly about maturity, although it can certainly include those levels. I especially like that the word maturity has different applications. It can mean full ripeness in fruits and vegetables, that brief window of time when flavor is at its peak. Maturity can also mean full development and perfected condition of nearly anything.

As far as I know, awakenings along the path to maturity have typically — and almost always — occurred one human being at a time. Whether that’s correct or not, predictions are made, from time to time, about the onset of “great collective awakenings,” often synchronized with some momentous event in the heavens.

Since astrology is a symbolic system that straddles the tangible and the intangible realms, from the material to the “spiritual,” it is frequently cited in such predictions of mass awakenings. Seemingly every couple of years, some astrologer (or astrologers) isolate certain supposedly rare and “special” alignments of bodies in the heavens and claim that the configuration indicates, in one way or another, a change in our collective consciousness and maturity. The announcements are usually positive, implying a step away from the dark side of human nature and a shift toward the light.

The most well-known of these recent predictions of mass awakening was the “Harmonic Convergence” in 1987, when eight major bodies in our solar system (as viewed from the earth) formed a Grand Trine, an equilateral triangle. Grand Trines are often interpreted in astrology as beneficent alignments, signaling a smooth transition to increased understanding or more effective action. The

downside to Grand Trines are that they are not particularly energetic and tend not to correspond to dramatic change. That particular Grand Trine in 1987 became linked to certain changes in the Mayan Calendar, and, for a brief time at least, a fair amount of buzz occurred in public media. While certain changes did ensue, most obviously the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the presumed "ending" of the Cold War, along with a kind of drunken celebration of capitalism's "victory," I wouldn't say that those and other positive changes have endured.

An earlier event also captivated some public imagination. That was the Broadway musical called "Hair" that opened in 1968 (and was later made into a Hollywood movie). One of the theme songs from Hair — "Aquarius," which became a big pop hit for the musical group *The Fifth Dimension* — touted the "Age of Aquarius." Below are two stanzas of well-known lyrics from that song:

*When the moon is in the Seventh House
And Jupiter aligns with Mars
Then peace will guide the planets
And love will steer the stars
This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius
Age of Aquarius
Aquarius
Aquarius*

*Harmony and understanding
Sympathy and trust abounding
No more falsehoods or derisions
Golden living dreams of visions
Mystic crystal revelation
And the mind's true liberation
Aquarius
Aquarius*

Despite the opening two lines, which are downright silly, the Age of Aquarius is a serious event in astrology, based on the Precession of the Equinoxes. For the past 2,000 years, we've been moving through the Age of Pisces. Sometime in the 20th or 21st centuries (the precise year cannot be accurately determined), the point of the vernal equinox (the 0° Aries point in the seasonal or tropical zodiac) will have moved backward in the fixed stars (the sidereal zodiac) to leave Pisces and enter Aquarius.

This is presumed to correspond to changes in collective humanity and society. As an astrologer, I find that meaningful and reasonable, but not immediately spectacular, in that it does not to me represent an "awakening" of consciousness, but instead a shift in the zeitgeist — a change in how we organize and think about civilization and go about our business as industrious social animals. Whether or not the Age of Aquarius might promote or enhance our maturation as a species is another matter entirely.

The lyrics of the pop song gently mock the hippie "new age" naiveté surrounding the assumed "positive" qualities of the Aquarian Age, but do not list any of the

“negative” possibilities, of which many exist. The song presents only the bright side, however tongue-in-cheek its intention. As I’ve written often, my understanding of astrology is that nothing in the astrological system is inherently “good” or uniformly “bad.” The symbols themselves are neutral. Expressions of the symbols in human beings — individually or collectively — can be and are all over the map: from wonderful to horrible, and everything in between.

Certainly significant changes have occurred in civilization as far back as we care to go. In just the past two millennia, we’ve gone through the fall of Rome, the onset of Christianity and Islam, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, two Industrial Revolutions, and now the Technological Revolution. Each period marked new developments that altered individuals and the collective. But do these truly qualify as “awakenings” toward higher consciousness and maturity? From where I sit, the answer is no. My perception is that human nature has remained the same, essentially unaltered. Yes, the shapes and forms of how we live and what we believe have gone through many changes, but — from my admittedly limited knowledge and perspective — we are still the same species we were 50,000 years ago in terms of our basic hard-wiring.

While I remain skeptical about the possibility of a “collective awakening,” I notice a distinct change in my attitudes over the past decade, and particularly the most recent two years.

Earlier in my life, I believed that the individual flowering of consciousness was the natural vehicle for human awakening, and that it might (or so I hoped) prove sufficient to allow over the long-term a more general evolution of humanity. Now, however, I fear that the luxury of time is running out.

The founders of this nation — Jefferson, Franklin, etc. — while committed to the “great experiment” in representative democracy through the form of a republic, an experiment that grew out of the philosophical underpinnings of The Age of Reason, nonetheless held serious doubts about the long-term viability of the governing principles they had enshrined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Their concerns were based not on structural issues, debates about policy, or the impossibility of predicting future conditions, but instead on the inherent difficulties of human nature, specifically the human tendency toward corruption, authoritarianism, domination, and the whole host of other “dark side” shadow aspects that lurk within us.

Given the pragmatic truism that most people just want to live their lives undisturbed by the burdensome responsibilities of citizen activism, would we be able to hold onto our republic? The America I learned about in school during my early years was presented as a paragon of virtue (later characterized as Ronald Reagan’s “shining city on the hill”), and that view is still strongly held by many Americans. History includes other perspectives, however, where we are not always the “good guys,” and too often something much more menacing.

Whatever our past faults or failings, however, what concerns me today is our current situation. America seems to have become the dragon eating its own tail. Slowly and sporadically throughout the 20th century, but accelerating dramatically over the past 40 years, the founders' worrisome concerns have come to pass.

Like a house infested with termites, the forces of plutocracy have eaten away at the democratic foundations of our society and government. The perpetual watchfulness required by citizens to sustain the experiment and keep it on track and moving forward has not been sufficient to prevent deepening corruption of our ideals, our society, our institutions, and our government. Yes, the house is still standing, but for how much longer?

To use another well-known metaphor, like the Titanic, the ship of civilization — and especially America — is bearing down on a collision course with an iceberg, and we don't have the luxury of another two centuries to change course and avoid catastrophe. Hell, we probably don't have even a single century.

The chances of our collectively changing for the better simply because we wise up seem to me very unlikely — basically zero. We're going to need some serious shocks to provoke us from our slumber — knocks up the side of our heads to get our attention — and these are already mounting, both from nature and from our own foolish decisions. Such episodes of "awakening shocks" will almost certainly become more frequent and more extreme over the coming years. Whether we can rescue ourselves and civilization from our own worst impulses is an open question, but it won't be because we drift off into dreamland. Reality will intervene.

So, my attitude these days is that we need a miracle — actually, a bunch of them.

After Trump's election to the Presidency in 2016, Ralph Nader called Chris Hedges and said, *"Everything we tried" [presumably over the past 40 years, which is the period of my own adulthood] "has failed."* More than most people, Ralph Nader knows what he's talking about.

Our situation is dire. That goes far beyond Donald Trump, who — while despicable and dangerous — is only the most obvious symbol of a deeper and more pervasive perniciousness that now holds America in a death-grip.

"Reasonable" solutions to what ails us are fading into the sunset, as is the likelihood that any such reasonable solutions will be adopted. The entrenched power, both visible and invisible, is profoundly cancerous and so sophisticated that it will not yield to ordinary pressures or any checks and balances.

The miracles we need are not revolutions, *per se*, since most political revolutions are violently destructive and rarely succeed in achieving their aims. Instead, we need what effectively amounts to “changes of heart” through social movements that galvanize the populace, arise organically, and integrate revolution with evolution.

Are these “miracles” truly awakenings into greater mass consciousness, or are they just shifts in collective beliefs, changes at the level of cultural memes? When it comes right down to it, I don’t really care, as long as they’re effective.

Of the various miracles that may be required to prevent our demons from devouring us, one that’s underway now that’s given me a glimmer of optimism (a rare commodity in my life these days) is the movement among women to stand up, demand that their voices be heard, and take power from the ruling patriarchy (the “good ole’ boy’s club”).

Other necessary miracles (from my viewpoint) would include:

- Concerted efforts to minimize accelerating climate change. That phrase is a misnomer, of course. The acronym coming into usage by science now is ACD — Anthropogenic Climate Disruption. If any viable solutions remain (and we may already be beyond the tipping point of no return), they will require a coordinated, world-wide effort. No single nation or government can achieve this alone, but America must participate actively, rather than back away and pretend that the problem doesn’t exist, as we are now officially doing.
- De-nuclearizing the planet, in both weaponry and energy production. We are simply not wise enough as a species to safely manage such dangerous power without disastrous consequences.
- Moving away from tribalized factionalism and toward acceptance of an inclusive human family that is also part of the living biosphere. The powers-that-be have a vested interest in keeping the bottom 90% of the population fighting amongst ourselves. Disenthraling ourselves from those false narratives is essential.
- Re-thinking economics and culture, so that the values that inform our decisions are not based solely on money. At the institutional level, we seem unwilling to even discuss preparing for a long-term economic contraction. Endless growth, the commodification of everything, and increasing consumerism are accepted without question, but those days are almost certainly coming to an end. Even the wealthy will not easily survive the kind of global collapse in finance and economics that may be around the corner.

I don’t know if any such miracles are possible. Right now, they seem unlikely, given where America is. Of course, the miraculous is not something we can see coming, so perhaps we will all be surprised.