
THE HERBST NEWSLETTER

astrological-cultural-spiritual-political views & opinions

--- Thoughts, dates, and reminders about our lives as members of the craziest species on this lovely planet. Like a message in a bottle washing up on the sandy shores of consciousness ---

Issue #113; July 2009

Dear friends,

This month's commentary is about the obvious disconnect between reality and dreaming. Though the Great Change has begun, in this early stage we are not yet *connected*.

--Bill Herbst

Commentary: **Prescient Visions, Unreal Expectations**

For those of us who perceive the inevitability and the necessity of profound collective changes in the decade immediately ahead and throughout the century to follow, some forecasts are held in general agreement, while others remain contentious or simply unknown.

An example of consensus is the prediction that we will be forced to reconsider and fundamentally alter both our way of life and our approach to every productive social activity, including business, finance, and economics. Anyone with half a brain knows that our way of life is neither non-negotiable nor sacrosanct, despite the continuing assertions of politicians to the contrary. Similarly, we agree that the efforts of the corporate and governmental elites who seek to restore the status quo by injecting trillions of fiat dollars into our ruined (a nicer word than *looted*) fiscal systems will succeed only in making the collapse much deeper, longer, and probably harsher than it might otherwise be.

In 2009, during these early years of the breakdown of unsustainable institutions — which might be considered Phase One of the collective challenge — many individual voices are crying out for a practical reorganization to begin now, while we still have viable options and before our backs are to the wall. These voices of pragmatism are routinely ignored by the powers-that-be and will remain mostly unheard (except by those of us who are like-minded, of course) until after the critical mass year of 2012. In the meantime, others who wield the power of collective decision-making are doing precisely what we would expect them to do: They are following the wishes of the ruling elites, whose sole interest is to

protect the authority and wealth they have so carefully amassed (again, a nicer word than *looted*) from the base of the pyramid below. If this means trashing the future not only for the rest of us but for themselves as well, then so be it.

Our current rulers will do that not so much because they don't care about the future, but rather because it's all they know how to do, and anyway, smarter decisions would require giving up a portion of their power and privilege. If we understand anything with certainty about the general tenets of the human condition, especially in the social pecking order, we know that elites do not willingly share or (heaven forbid) *give up* any of their power. They jealously guard their influence no matter who suffers in that effort.

This is the bone I have to pick with certain otherwise brilliant pundits who are chancleers for the Great Change. One in particular (who shall remain nameless, since I wish to start no flame wars with public figures) is remarkably prescient in his grasp of the scope and specifics of what must change in society and even in his vision of how positive new structures can be implemented. Unfortunately, this same writer peppers his weekly essays with so much snide outrage that reading his commentaries is often difficult. His anger sullies his impact. Does he really expect all those elected representatives and corporate lobbyists who have arrived at positions of influence by dutifully serving the Empire to do anything other than continue as servants of the Imperial hand that feeds them??? Why is this tautology apparently so shocking to him?

Other seemingly intelligent commentators are indignant about the opposite end of the social spectrum, namely, the complacency of the American public. They rant about the lack of organized demonstrations, asking why the great unwashed masses haven't taken to the streets to demand more equitable policies in areas such as wages, healthcare, and debt relief. To these pundits I have to ask: Where have you been the past 50 years? Have you failed to notice that the American population has been subjected to the most ingeniously subtle yet potentially pervasive forms of psychological and social mind-control ever devised?

As I have written before, the great breakthroughs in the infant science of psychology during the 20th century came less in the areas of restoration of health and well-being through therapy and much more in industrial techniques of mass mind-control through advertising, propaganda, and false promises.

No, America never resorted to the crude, harsh restraints of Russian or Chinese totalitarianism (not yet, anyway). We didn't need to. Instead, we developed television and a pop culture that anesthetizes every impulse toward authentic freedom of thought and co-opts every intention of truly independent action by diverting our attention away from what is real and toward what is fantasy-based and escapist. Whenever reality intrudes, the offer of the Dream is redoubled: You too can make it rich in America and join the royalty of millionaires, and even if you haven't yet won the lottery, we'll sell you a cool iPod Touch with all the downloadable games! And by the way, you deserve to have *everything* you want *NOW*, instantly, with no limits and no waiting. Just plunk down that credit card.

Meanwhile, America was divided and conquered. Family may have remained a Big Deal in this country, but it's still as dysfunctional as ever, and more general

notions of togetherness gradually gave way to alienation. Real community was dismantled in favor of either fake community (television and cyberspace) or no community at all, other than that of shared consumption. The *festival* of a communal barn dance, where everyone is invited to participate, has been overwhelmed by the *spectacle* of The Super Bowl, which we are encouraged to *watch* passively.

Significantly, the last period of serious social protests — the 1960s — grew out of the civil rights movement. Black anger over the festering wounds of racism that run so deep in the American psyche was the catalyst that provoked shared outrage. Now, that anger and other righteous passions are artificially pacified, drugged into submission and passive cynicism, killed by convenience. Americans don't even get off the couch to change channels on the television anymore. Mass civil disobedience, both organized and spontaneous, with real threats of non-compliance, will return, but not before 2012 at the earliest, 2015 at the outside.

In the meantime, those of us who consciously anticipate The Big Change prepare as best we can, but mostly we wait, watch, listen, read, and talk to each other. Below is an abbreviated list of some of the individuals I read with admiration and agreement. Rather than try to encapsulate a profile of each author's cultural niche, I've listed at least one of his or her books. All these people are well worth reading.

Sharon Astyk, ***Depletion and Abundance: Life on the New Home Front***

Joe Bageant, ***Deer Hunting with Jesus***

Carolyn Baker, ***Sacred Demise: Walking the Spiritual Path of Industrial Civilization's Collapse***

Thomas Berry, ***The Great Work: Our Way into the Future***

Helen Caldicott, ***Nuclear Power Is Not the Answer***

Jared Diamond, ***Collapse: How Societies Choose to Succeed or Fail***

Riane Eisler, ***The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics***

Barbara Ehrenreich, ***Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy***

Catherine Austin Fitts, ***Crossing the Rubicon: The Decline of the American Empire at the End of the Age of Oil*** (co-author Michael C. Ruppert)

Richard Heinberg, ***The Party's Over*** and ***Power Down***

David Korten, ***The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community***

Derrick Jensen, ***End Game: The Problem of Civilization***

William Kotke, ***The Final Empire: The Collapse of Civilization and the Seed of the Future***

James Howard Kunstler, ***The Long Emergency: Surviving the End of Oil, Climate Change, and Other Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century***

Bill McKibben, ***The End of Nature*** and ***Deep Economy***

Arundhati Roy, ***Field Notes on Democracy: Listening to Grasshoppers***

Matt Savinar, ***Peak Oil: Life After the Oil Crash***

Vandana Shiva, ***Soil Not Oil: Environmental Justice in an Age of Climate Crisis***

William Strauss/Neil Howe, ***Generations*** and ***The Fourth Turning***

Gore Vidal, ***Dreaming War: Blood for Oil***

Howard Zinn, ***A People's History of the United States***

In June, President Obama unveiled his proposed legislation to regulate the banking industry. Wait, you ask, weren't banks already regulated? Well, sort of. Legally, yes, but pragmatically, not much. See, the banks had this cozy relationship with their federal regulators, auditors, and rating services, so much so that the very people charged with constraining banks from excessive greed or outright thievery simply didn't do their jobs. So the problem was less about insufficient legal safeguards (although some critical legal restraints were removed in the early 1990s), and more about human nature, specifically one manifestation of the Good Ole' Boy Network, namely, that of allowing the foxes to guard the henhouse.

Well then, does Obama's bill provide serious reforms in preventing a future meltdown of financial services? Not really. See, the bankers helped draft the proposed legislation and are pretty much writing it themselves. Just as they lobbied *against* a small bailout of American homeowners facing resetting mortgages this past spring (and got their way with the bill's defeat), so they are getting their way again by using their influence to allow essentially the same cozy relationships with regulators in the future that these bankers had in the past. As a result, some regulations will change, but the lack of oversight or enforcement won't.

My question (the same question I've been asking for the past couple of months) is this: Is anyone actually surprised that this bill has no teeth? Is anyone really shocked by the lack of real reform? Whoever is surprised or shocked must be one very naïve puppy.

That's the bad news. That nothing is changing yet even though everything is going to hell in a hand basket. The good news is that this too shall pass. Substantive reform of our financial system will come eventually, but it's still probably five to six years away.

This past month also saw the announcement by Governor Schwarzenegger and state finance officials that California is bankrupt and faces imminent default to its debtors and citizens. This means, among other catastrophes, that California may not send monthly checks to formerly state-employed retirees, who will then be, metaphorically, at least, up sh*t creek without a paddle, along with students, healthcare patient reimbursees, and anyone else who relies on money from California's state coffers.

What I find puzzling about this is not the mere fact that California is in desperate financial straits. Most states in the U.S. are suffering severe financial duress, and many others besides California are flirting with bankruptcy. No, that's not news. What is news is that in the midst of turning California's pockets inside out to reveal not a penny, this same state is proposing to initiate the largest and most expensive public works program *ever* undertaken: a high-speed bullet train network.

At a time when investment modesty would seem a realistic and prudent alternative, transportation planners in California are writing off the existing rail

system, which could be refurbished for a pittance, relatively speaking, in favor of a gargantuan investment, with money California doesn't have, in a high-tech luxury fantasy, which faces so many obstacles (legal, political, environmental, economic) that it may never actually get built. Our visions continue to be grandiose and dream-based, not pragmatic and reality-based. These planners still believe we can have whatever we imagine, rather than making do with what we have. And why the obsession with 200-mph bullet trains? Along with scaling back and powering down, decelerating is at the heart of what we must do to birth a sane civilization. We need to slow down. 100-mph conventional trains are fast enough.

As a final note, last week saw two very different icons of modern pop culture exit stage left. Farrah Fawcett and Michael Jackson both shuffled off this mortal coil on the same day, June 25th. As a group, entertainers die off with the same predictable regularity as the rest of us, but these two individuals were without doubt larger-than-life figures whose archetypal appeal was universal in scope and global in impact. Jackson in particular embodied the strange blend of extraordinary talent and unapologetic perversity that mirrored the excesses of a culture that glorifies infantile desires.

Given the fragility of my own physical condition, I mark the passing of these entertainers with a nod and an air of cosmic neutrality. As my Boomer compatriots and I enter into seniorhood, questions about meaning and mortality move toward center-stage. And that's as it should be. But the loss of what may have always been false or illusory security will soon touch everyone, not just us doddering old farts. Never again in our lifetimes will Americans of any age enjoy the sense of triumphal, confident safety that characterized middle-class life in this country for so long. New and darker clouds of uncertainty are rolling in, cutting across all generational cohorts, leaving us to grapple with our mortality.

Over the past century, we tried to banish death in America, at least our own deaths, by hiding away that transformation in hospitals, nursing homes, and foreign countries where we made war. Such artificial and antiseptic immortality cost us dearly by diminishing our humanity, shriveling our compassion for others' suffering, and making invisible our essential connection to the natural world.

In the decades ahead, we will regain much of what was lost.

I may take next month off from the newsletters to finalize an article for The Mountain Astrologer (based on the April and May commentaries). So, if you don't receive an August newsletter, that's probably why. A summer break from monthly deadlines.

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