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# 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 ---

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## Commentary: **The Wizards of Wall Street**

In the 1939 classic children's movie, "The Wizard of Oz," one of the great revelatory moments occurs in the third act after Dorothy and her friends have miraculously accomplished their assigned task of securing the broomstick of the Wicked Witch of the West by inadvertently dousing her with a bucket of water ("Oh, what a world, what a world!! I'm melting, MELTING!!!"). Our intrepid adventurers can now return to Oz with their trophy. Fade out and cut to their promised second audience with the Wizard, a stern apparition accompanied by belching fire and smoke, who instructs them loudly to come back tomorrow. I remember in early childhood feeling quite terrified of that fearsome round image of the angry Wizard's face, even after repeated yearly viewings of the movie.

But then, while Dorothy and crew are protesting the Wizard's renegeing on his promise, the camera follows Toto to stage left where the little dog disappears under a curtain, behind which we see a pair of shoes. After a quick camera pullback and pan, Toto grabs the curtain and draws it open, exposing the fearsome Wizard as nothing more than an electro-mechanical special-effects phantasm (strangely reminiscent of arena rock concert fireworks-and-light-show extravaganzas from the 1970s), and revealing the manipulator of the wheels and dials to be none other than Professor Marvel, the disreputable but kindly traveling fortune teller from early in the movie, now transformed in Dorothy's dream into the sham Wizard. [Actor Frank Morgan played not only Professor Marvel and the Wizard, but three other cameos as well, the Oz Gatekeeper, the Carriage Driver, and the Soldier Who Cries.] The audience gets the joke immediately, but in that first moment after being outed by Toto, Professor Marvel tries to cover his butt by yanking the curtain shut again and sputtering into the microphone, "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!!"

Unfortunately for the bogus Professor, the jig is already up, his cover is blown, and we are about to move into the sweetest moments of the movie, when the screenplay suddenly veers into more familiar territory by trying to convince us that good old American common sense and unvarnished prairie homilies are more powerful than magic. This is accomplished by the chastened but buoyant Professor Marvel, who turns out to be a "Kansas man" himself, granting the

various requests---a brain for the Scarecrow (via a Diploma), courage for the Cowardly Lion (via a Medal for Bravery), a heart for the Tin Man (via a Testimonial heart-shaped clock and the saccharine advice: "Remember, my sentimental friend, that a heart is not judged by how much *you* love, but by how much you are loved by *others*"). He even grants Dorothy a personally escorted trip home to Kansas (via balloon). Meanwhile, the audience goes all teary-eyed. Even today, having seen the movie at least 25 times, I still get moist and dewy at that sequence.

Before those heartwarming scenes, however, in the first moment following discovery that the Wizard isn't "real," Dorothy and her compatriots are livid at his deception and verbally tear him a new one, as the saying goes. Dorothy chastises the poor wretch by the terse accusation (in a childlike close-up) that, "You're a very bad man." The now thoroughly humbled wizard responds haltingly and with deep feeling, "No, my dear. I'm a very *good* man. I'm just a very bad *wizard*."

This sequence in *The Wizard of Oz* is just one of various intertwined morality tales woven into the children's story. The particular lesson here is to be extremely careful about the supposed "authority" one believes. If this were the 1960s, we might say "Don't trust anyone over 30." Or we could hearken back to Rome and the more general admonition of the marketplace, "Caveat Emptor" (Let the buyer beware). And finally, there is the old magician's warning: "Believe nothing of what you hear and only half of what you see."

All of these cautionary aphorisms apply to the predicament Americans find ourselves in today relative to our ruling elites---elected politicians, institutional heads, corporate executives, mainstream media (and much of the internet fringe media as well), and the ultra-rich behind the scenes who control where and to whom the money flows. From where we sit, they are all very bad people. From where they sit, they are all very *good* people, just very bad *wizards* (as it turns out).

Where the analogy breaks down, unfortunately, is that the Wizard in the movie always *knew* that he was a false wizard, but he went ahead and played the role anyway, doing so in part because of his rationalization that the trusting, naïve citizens of Oz *wanted* a Wizard to believe in, but more likely doing so because it feathered his own nest. He may have longed to end the charade from time to time, but the posing couldn't really stop until he was found out.

By contrast, the privileged members of the oligarchy that runs America always believed (and still do) that they are both Masters of the Universe and True Wizards, deserving of all the wealth they can legally steal. Oops, pardon me. The elites in power obviously don't regard the siphoning off of trillions of dollars of wealth from ordinary Americans as "stealing." I'm not sure how they see their 40-year effort to shift wealth upwards in America, a campaign that has been spectacularly successful, by the way. Never before in America's 230-some year history has the wealth differential between the "Haves" and the "Have Nots" been more extreme than today.

The bottom line is that we live amidst a never-ending onslaught of lies, deceit, corruption, and outright thievery in institutional America, all conducted behind the mask of authority, propriety, and paternalism: Father knows best. Trust Father.

Because of the health care debate and the economic meltdown, President Obama is now reaping the bitter fruit of being labeled "a very bad man" by millions of ultra-conservative Americans. But he is also being called "a very bad wizard" by a growing percentage of disillusioned liberals and progressives who formerly supported him. That the President is excoriated by wing-nut Republicans is no surprise, and the ending of his short-lived honeymoon among Democrats is a predictable lesson in the reality of politics.

Every four years, a sizable segment of the American public reverts to childish naïveté in believing the rhetoric of some politico who wants to be President. [As an aside, I have to offer the paradoxical Catch-22 that the personal ambition to be President is sufficient proof of insanity that any such candidate should be disqualified from holding the office.] The quadrennial loss of common sense among ordinary Americans is connected to the inherent contradictions of American mythology.

On the one hand, America idealizes social justice, fairness, and equality for all. Hand in hand with those longings go principles of honesty, integrity, and compassion. Simultaneously, however, America also idealizes a harder self-reliance through the full-blown, untrammelled pursuit of material wealth. This capitalistic side of the coin includes business success at any cost, including lying, cheating, stealing, and even murder (as long as one doesn't get caught).

Those ideals — which enshrine such divergent, contradictory layers of the human psyche — actually *do* intersect in Americans' continuing belief in unlimited economic social mobility, namely, the largely debunked insistence that anyone can rise from humble origins to become filthy rich in America. Not just the well-born or privileged, not just the smart and well-educated, but any bozo can strike the mother lode of wealth by hard work, pluck, and good karma (the Horatio Alger myth).

As a result, many Americans, especially those who willingly embrace the contradictory mythologies of our culture, reject nationalized, government-run single-payer health care otherwise known as *socialized medicine*. Why? Because "real" Americans get rich first, then buy the best, most expensive health care insurance for themselves and their families, damn it!!! In America, nothing is sacred; everything is fair game as a commodity. All natural resources and human activities are grist for the mill of commerce, including spirituality, medicine, motherhood, and apple pie, so we must *never* take health care out of the hands of business, which rightly put profits first.

Anyway, America can't afford health care for everyone anymore, not after rescuing the poor, innocent bankers from all those stupid, low-life schmucks who took out mortgages on homes they couldn't pay for.

Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke opined recently that the “recession” was effectively over. He did admit that “recovery,” meaning the return to business-as-usual, might take somewhat longer than normal. The mainstream media immediately fell into lockstep behind Bernanke, announcing that happy days are, if not quite within sight, at least around the corner.

Yeah, sure. Tell me another one. Yank my chain again. I don’t know what’s wrong with these people, whether they actually believe the twaddle they put out, or if they’ve been drinking the kool-aid for so long that they’re developed antibodies to the poison, but they are really full of it.

Rather than entering Phase One of the recovery, where we are collectively is — in reality — exactly the opposite of what we are told by the Wizards of Wall Street, which extends to President Obama and his unholy trio of economic advisers. If Toto would just pull back the curtain, we’d see that we are near the end of Phase One of this Global Economic Meltdown, with Phase Two — the collapse of commercial real estate — waiting in the wings.

Despite the bailout, trillions of dollars of toxic debt are still hidden in the secret spreadsheets of major banks, which face a second round of failures in 2010, pounding further nails into the coffin of the FIRE economy we chose after dismantling our manufacturing base and relying on the third world to produce actual products. FIRE is an acronym for Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate (F-I-RE). America doesn’t make anything anymore. We just move money around, or rather, we did. Now the bubblicious boom-bust cycles of massive profit-taking and dependence on village-idiot economics of unlimited growth have bankrupted our country and ruined what was left of the economy.

This may sound awful, but it’s only half as bad as it seems. Paradoxically, recovery would be the worst news, for it would mean that the wizards had succeeded in restoring the same old systems of predatory capitalism that have ebbed and flowed (but flowed more than ebbed) throughout this nation’s two centuries, to the point of their current near-total domination of damn near everything in this country. America doesn’t need a recovery. America needs a complete overhaul of its financial institutions and economic basis (and some therapy for its soul while we’re at it). Going back is not an option.

So, what’s the moral of the story? In Dorothy’s dream of Oz, the moral is: “*There’s no place like home,*” which is a good tag line for the relocalization movement that will emerge in the coming years. In our contemporary reality, however, the moral is *to not place one’s trust in wizards.*

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