

The Future

by Bill Herbst

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We have a problem with the future, and it's beginning to look like that problem just might do us in. Wait, Bill — when you write “do us in,” do you mean something as drastic as extinction of the human species? Well, yeah. That's the worst case scenario, of course, and most people would pooh-poo the idea of total extinction, but perhaps we should consider that possibility.

Nature, which is to say, evolution, has endowed us with an operating system where our perceptions are optimized to care about the immediate future — the rest of today, tomorrow, next week, next month, maybe next year, and perhaps, if we're truly far-sighted, the next decade. Beyond that however, we don't much care. It's not that we're necessarily clueless about the longer term ramifications of what we're doing now, but — despite whatever lip service we may give to those future times further down the road — we really don't care.

By “we,” I mean everybody — all of us — but I'm particularly singling out those people in power, the humans who are in charge and make the decisions about how to allocate, invest, and spend our collective resources. The fact that most of us don't care about the longer-term future isn't of great consequence, because, by and large, we're not the ones who are shaping that future. By contrast (and it's a profoundly stark contrast), those in power *are* creating the future now. Quite literally, how those people choose to spend our collective resources today will influence reality 50 or 100 years down the road by selecting some options over others, thus making certain futures more likely and others less possible.

Now, in fairness, even the elites in power do not have complete say in creating the future. Wild-cards can arise at any time that might significantly alter or even trump completely whatever we do. The cosmos could intercede in ways we can neither predict nor prevent. For instance, a large meteor might collide with the earth (that's happened before and will occur again), or a particularly devastating solar storm could erupt that happens to be aimed directly at our planet. Either of these events would mean that all bets were off. Whatever we humans had been doing to create the future would be consigned immediately to the realm of the puny and insignificant.

Barring any such wild-cards, however, human beings, and specifically the relatively small club of those in power, have tremendous input into how the medium- and long-term futures will unfold and what they will look like.

Unfortunately, this is very bad news for our species and for the earth. Throughout the entire history of the last 200,000 years on this planet, where humans were slowly (and for a long time imperceptibly) becoming the dominant force in shaping the earth's ecosystem, we didn't have enough power to really affect the future much at all. We could do great things, or we could fuck up terribly, and it really didn't matter in terms of the long-term consequences. Up until about 200 years ago, the curve of human population and human power (i.e., our ability to mess with the ecosystem in any significant way) had been trundling along at a nearly horizontal baseline, with both population and power increasing only very slowly. About 200 years ago, however, as we achieved critical mass for the industrial and then technological revolutions, that curve suddenly spiked upwards. Our population and our power began to escalate dramatically.

Now those two curves — population and power — are almost vertical. What was incremental before has become algebraic. When I was born very near the middle of the 20th century (November, 1949), the population of the U.S. was 150 million people, and the global human population in total at that point in time was 2.5 billion. Now, a mere seven decades later, the U.S. population has more than doubled to 330 million, and the global population has more than *tripled* to a staggering 8 billion.

But as astonishing as that may be, the growth of our knowledge about how to manipulate our environments has been even more stunning. In the 21st century, each decade's additional scientific and technical knowledge effectively doubles the previous sum total of all human knowledge from the past. The acceleration of our knowledge and the resulting increase in our power to change things are mind-boggling. And I don't mean that just poetically. It's actually driving us crazy. The reason for this loss of sanity is that we're not merely adding new knowledge to what we knew before, we are *replacing* old knowledge. Much of what we once knew is being lost, and our understanding of reality is suffering because of that loss. We may know more, but we are less wise.

We find ourselves in the situation of the Sorcerer's Apprentice. Much of the wisdom that was amassed over the previous 200,000 years of our history has gone missing. Science and technology have inadvertently opened the floodgates to an untrammled focus on power to the exclusion of almost everything else, motivated by the single value of monetary gain. In the past, at least to some extent, the use of our human power was guided by reverence. As a guardrail, that reverence — which is a form of wisdom inspired by love and maturity — was a pretty good substitute for our biological and genetic lack of ability to see, understand, or be concerned about anything past the immediate future. Yes, our limited power was the primary factor of restraint, of course, but we also had access to the wisdom that came from love, basically a guiding hand toward understanding what was worth doing versus what wasn't, what was safe and

secure versus what was risky and dangerous, what was smart versus what was foolish.

The basis for true conservatism is an appreciation for the traditional wisdom that helps us understand what to change and what to leave as is. Much of what is called conservatism today, however, is little more than nostalgia for lost privilege and dominance, combined with resentment and fear. That's a shame, because authentic conservatism has always been and remains immensely valuable. There's just less of that now than in the past.

As our power has spiked upwards, we have forgotten much of our former wisdom. Love, reverence, and maturity no longer safeguard us against misuse of power. These days, about the only question we ask concerning what we might do with our power is: *Can we?* If the answer is yes, we can, then we do it. Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead. We change everything we can, simply because we can. The thrill of using our new-found and ever-increasing powers outweighs any moral, ethical, or even practical considerations of whether what we might do is wise or not. And, of course, if there is profit to be gained, then we go ahead without any hesitation.

At this point, we have to be able to see (and almost "feel") the future for that to factor into our decisions about the allocation and use of our power. And this is where the biological and genetic limitations become so serious, even potentially fatal. For the first time ever, humanity is facing the possibility of extinction as a species at our own hands. Please understand: I'm aware that everyone dies, and every species eventually goes extinct, but that's not at all the same as premature collective suicide. Humanity has become suicidal in modern civilization, and almost willfully so. In part, this is because our leaders are fools.

I've begun recently writing about monsters and their minions. Now I want to add another category, that of fools. Some of those in charge are monsters. Most are fools.

Being a fool is not the same as being an idiot. When I assert that our leaders are fools, I don't mean to imply that they are intellectually stupid. No, they're often very bright (at least some of them). But almost all of them are fools nonetheless. Why? Because their focus is dramatically limited. They tend not to see or care about anything past their particular passions, and they're not guided by the reverence of love in how they wield their power. Their actions imply that these so-called leaders don't care about future generations as yet unborn at all, and many of them don't even seem to care about currently existing generations.

Part of why we have fools for leaders is that the system in place pre-selects for fools. People who feel great reverence (and there are hundreds of millions of such people on the planet right now) are not drawn to go into politics. Many of them are not attracted to business, either. In fact, they are strongly disinclined to enter into either of those arenas. They know full well that professions in

politics and business will deny or frustrate their reverence by forcing them to act in inauthentic and foolish ways, so they don't choose to go down those roads. They may seek employment in government or business, but that's because they see no other viable option to earn a livelihood and support their families. But even those people don't become leaders.

Reverence necessarily requires a certain humility, and humility is not conducive to the exercise of power. People who choose to go into politics or business tend overwhelmingly to be ambitious, oriented toward wealth, power, and status. They are also typically ego-driven. I would include science here, even though it's in a somewhat different category. Science is still very young and vulnerable to infatuation with power. So, I'll lump together politics, business, and science. Many people who go into these realms of endeavor start out with sincerely good intentions, hoping to serve humanity and improve the world, but those idealistic values rarely survive the seductions of success, which are incredibly potent in transforming people into fools and assholes.

And so, we have a civilization run by fools, based on Death Culture. The lack of concern for the future, combined with an absence of reverence for the past and present, result in our setting up the modern world with a thousand unspeakable disasters just waiting for the right trigger to unfold and wipe us out.

Besides the obvious candidates of human-caused climate disruption and nuclear war, other, slightly less visible catastrophes are already waiting in the wings. For instance, "hot" spent fuel used in nuclear fission reactors is stored on-site at those nuclear power reactors. This spent fuel is incredibly dangerous and needs constant cooling by circulating water to prevent cataclysmic meltdowns. Such a disaster could be triggered if the electrical power grid goes down for any length of time (such as, two months). That dire situation could be remedied with safer storage for a relatively small sum of money (a few billion dollars), but the fools in charge continue to ignore it.

Other examples of the Swords of Damocles under which we all live include poisoning of the environment through mining and the chemical fertilizers and pesticides used in factory agriculture that are making our food supply toxic. Humans bodies are adaptable and resilient, but bad food is increasing auto-immune disorders and the chronic diseases of aging. Next to food is water. An ample supply of clean water, once a given in America, is increasingly rare. Flint, Michigan is a perfect example of our leaders' foolishness.

Then there's medicine. Western medicine is a broken system, captive to Big Pharma. The COVID pandemic alerted us to the dangers of gain-of-function research, but this and other potentially lethal activities are ongoing, many of which are the offspring of the military-industrial complex. And to conclude this short list, there's the increasingly obvious fact that our economic and financial systems are travesties ruled by greed and held together with spit and bailing wire. Either or both could implode at any time, and with repercussions that

might make the credit-swap-derivatives financial meltdown of 2008 look like mere foreshadowing.

The fools in charge have no intention of doing anything about these and other very real risks to our existence. Any one of them could erupt, devastating civilization and decimating humanity. Some people believe that the powers-that-be are intentionally setting up the so-called "Great Reset" through nightmare scenarios that will kill off billions, thus achieving their goal to finally own 100% of everything. While some conspiracy theories are probably true and even those that aren't contain at least a grain of truth, I'm inclined to doubt the ability of the elites in power to pull off such a plan, if indeed one exists. Those in charge may regard themselves as Masters of the Universe, but they are usually just incompetent fools who are riding atop a wild bronco they say they're directing but actually can't control at all. Sure, the ride is exhilarating for them, but they couldn't stop if they wanted to. Just staying in the saddle is all they can manage. Even when they're bucked off, though, they still tell themselves that their mount is a well-broken horse they can command, rather than an angry Brahma bull they can't. Sadly, we are the ones who suffer when their arrogant foolishness produces disasters.

I'm not suggesting that only our leaders are foolish, nor that the masses are necessarily wise. Some regular people are mature, humble, and reverent, but many others aren't. And — to one degree or another — we're all complicit in the madness of Death Culture. My point in this commentary, however, is that those in charge who wield the most power have failed us and are leading us over a cliff — all of us.

I accept that extinction is about the most extreme outcome imaginable for humanity. That's the worst case scenario, obviously. I refer to it in this commentary precisely because it is so unthinkable. Lesser outcomes may be more likely, but none of our probable futures look good from where I sit. Civilization is very badly broken, and we have neither the will nor the savvy to fix it before it comes apart. Our best hope — and perhaps our only hope — is that, if we're lucky, enough of us will survive to make rising from the ashes and starting over a viable possibility.

As always, I could be wrong about this. Hell, I could be wrong about everything. I'm just writing what I see. What you see may be similar or different.