

Power and Wisdom

by Bill Herbst

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First, a definition of terms as I'm using them for this commentary. Power is the ability to alter an environment, transforming something into something else, while Wisdom is the knowledge of whether or not doing that is worthwhile. Power always says do it, while Wisdom says maybe, but maybe not. Take digesting food as an example: Power transforms the food we eat by breaking it down into the constituent nutrients that keep us alive. Wisdom would then be the knowledge of what to eat versus what not to — which foods serve us to support and enrich our lives versus which don't.

Power is passionate, direct, and unconcerned about the harm of unintended consequences. Wisdom is cautious, careful, and weighs risks versus rewards.

Power and Wisdom work together in an infinite variety of different ratios and equations. Imbalances or disharmonies between the two result inevitably in less than optimal results. That relationship was expressed poetically in what has come to be known as the "Serenity Prayer" composed by American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in 1932 and first published in 1951. The verse became a working axiom and standard precept of 12-step recovery groups:

*"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot
change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom
to know the difference."*

In the ideal, whether individually or collectively, Power and Wisdom should evolve together, in harmony and balance, but that hasn't been the case for humanity over the past 500 years.

Over that half millennium, many revolutions have shaped and dramatically altered civilization. In terms of impact, the two most important have been the Industrial Revolution of the 17th through the early 20th centuries and the Technological Revolution of the mid-20th and 21st centuries. Where Power and Wisdom are concerned, all the other political and social revolutions that occurred over that period pale by comparison.

500 years may seem like a long time, but — considered in the context of our species' evolutionary history — it amounts to the blinking of an eye.

Based on the current understanding of science in general and geneticists in particular, our bipedal hominid ancestors separated from apes about eight million

years ago and then from chimpanzees about three million years after that. Primitive humans showed up in the fossil record about 300,000 years ago, with anatomically modern humans emerging about 200,000 years ago. The biological refinement of our brains and nervous systems reached its current state about 100,000 years after that.

For the bulk of that 200,000 years in our species' current history, we lived in small kinship bands of 40-100 individuals. The terms most commonly used to describe earlier humans are "*hunter-gatherers*" or "*hunter-foragers*," but we were also fishermen, herders, shepherds, and horticulturalists. Some kinship bands were location-stable, living in semi-permanent villages, but many groups were nomadic, moving from place to place according to resource abundance or seasonal changes.

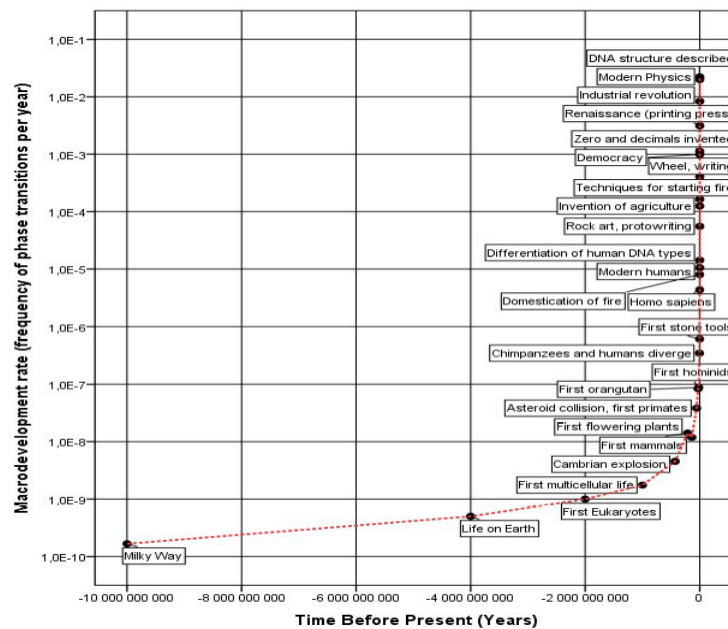
I don't wish to romanticize this long phase of our history by calling it idyllic, but, from an evolutionary standpoint, that style of living worked quite well as a niche that supported humans and life on earth in general. It is the way of life around which our brains were optimized.

Civilization took root about 12,000 years ago with larger, more permanent settlements, initially taking the form of city-states. The curve of social complexity began to rise, and our Power to impact the world increased incrementally. Over just the last two centuries, however — a mere one-tenth of one percent of our 200,000-year recent history, the curve of human Power spiked upward in a vertical scream, almost an explosion. Over that brief moment, our collective Wisdom remained about the same as it always had been.

One major change in our current understanding of human history concerns agriculture. Mere decades ago, we believed that horticulture (gardening) was supplanted by agriculture (monoculture crop farming) quite suddenly, with the onset of civilization. Now, however, both crop farming and the domestication of animals for labor are presumed to have occurred more gradually, over a much longer period of time. There is still wide agreement, however, that the dramatic change in the equation of human Power versus Wisdom began with the onset of civilization.

That profound shift is akin to the difference in mathematics between an *arithmetic* progression (adding: $1 + 1 + 1 + 1 = 4$) versus a *geometric* progression (multiplying: $1 \times 2 \times 4 \times 8 = 64$). Our Power tends to increase geometrically. Our Wisdom, however, increases only arithmetically.

Illustrated as a graph, the hyperbolic curve of collective human Power looks something like this:



That graph actually depicts a related but even larger evolutionary crisis called the *Kurzweil Singularity*, but the shape of the curve is similar to humanity's dilemma of Power outstripping Wisdom. The image shows visually that the balance between Power and Wisdom remained close for a long time until, quite suddenly, Power spiked up dramatically and left Wisdom in the dust.

That's where we are now. The Industrial and Technological Revolutions opened the doors to almost unimaginable Power, but they did not increase our Wisdom correspondingly. I would suggest that those two revolutions hardly increased our Wisdom at all. I understand that many people would disagree with me about that, pointing to developments such as women's suffrage as clear evidence of progress. Rather than argue that point, I would note instead civilization's current hyper-complexity as evidence to the contrary. Our ways of living are now so complicated as to be unmanageable. Collective human Wisdom is ill-suited to manage our Power with effectiveness, efficiency, or grace in almost any of the problematic situations in which we find ourselves.

In short, our Power is now like a runaway train. Without proper governance (Wisdom), the train is certain to derail or crash. That simile is inadequate, of course, since our situation is much worse than a mere runaway train. A better metaphor might be that Power has become a raging firestorm — a heat-producing engine that has no boundaries and grows ever more gargantuan by consuming everything it touches.

Power is no longer our servant, but our master, and a cruel master at that, since the heat from its combustion threatens to destroy not just us, but the very basis of life on earth. And yet, we don't possess sufficient Wisdom to even regulate this furnace. Some of us are so enthralled by the fireworks that we continue to dance around the inferno, oblivious to what is coming, but even those of us who are well aware of the imminent danger of immolation cannot stop the process. Having stoked the flames for more than a century, we don't have nearly enough Wisdom to know how or be able to turn down the heat.

And so, as in the historical myth of the mad emperor Nero, we fiddle while Rome burns. Admittedly, few of those who currently hold the reins share Nero's insane glee at the destruction. Many seem to me more akin to Mad Magazine's Alfred E. Neuman — "*What, Me Worry?*" Still others would sincerely like to stave off disaster and make things better, but their efforts and good intentions count for very little. One way or another, the end result is similar the Nero fable: We are essentially fiddling while civilization collapses and implodes.

It could be argued that the wisest among us have already realized how screwed we are and have shifted from preventing or even limiting collapse to preparing for the aftermath of picking up the pieces and starting over. I hesitate to call that "Wisdom," though, because typically such plans throw most of us under the bus through mass die-off. In too many of those scenarios, five or six billion of us will be considered simply collateral damage in the inevitable meltdown. Not a lot of compassion there. But the elites who are planning for such eventualities are not sentimental. They're pragmatic. Having feathered their own survival nests as well as they can, their visions of the future are cold and clear: Only a few of us are likely to remain standing; most of humanity will go down.

I imagine that many people at the top are foreseeing something similar to what occurred after the Bubonic Plague (the Black Death) ravaged Europe in the 14th century and again in the 16th. With a substantially reduced population, the laws of supply and demand brought a renewal of prosperity, with more resources shared among fewer people, and much greater opportunities for the survivors. Some historians even hold that the Italian Renaissance was a direct result of the extreme "pruning" of the Plague, which paved the way for an across-the-board reformulation of society.

Over my lifetime, the hope of many people was that our collective Wisdom might increase sufficiently to allow better management of our Power. That hope has not been realized. Individuals continue to mature toward Wisdom in widely divergent ways — some considerably, some only a little, and others not at all. This has always been so. Collectively, however, we are no wiser than we were 12,000 years ago. Our hearts and minds are not suited to such dramatic change.

Some spiritually-oriented people speak of (and still hope for) an event or series of events that might expand and deepen collective human Consciousness in the direction of greater maturity and more Wisdom. In my perception, that remains a magical fantasy that hasn't occurred and whose chances are slim to none.

As a result, our Power — which is still increasing geometrically, even as our civilization breaks down — produces increasing chaos and suffering. At this point, it appears that we're headed toward some version of the Plague as the most realistic possibility that could lead to a collective transformation. I wish this weren't so, because I don't relish being a de facto cheerleader for collapse and the trauma that accompanies it, but that's where we seem to be.

As I write often, I would love to be wrong.