Creatures of Our Times

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I want to write a little about the terrible dilemma of living in the modern world while attempting to be a good person and live a decent life. By "good" and "decent," I mean doing as little harm as possible to oneself, others, and the world. Even more specifically, I'm interested here in the conscious effort to refrain from contributing to or being complicit with Death Culture, the suicidal impulse to destroy all life that seems to have taken over as a primary feature of modern civilization.

Basically, my thesis in this commentary is that living a life of no harm is damn near impossible for any of us to achieve. This is the case regardless of the sincerity of our open-hearted best intentions. Intentions count for a little, but actions are what really matter. And in this world — the world of 21st century modern civilization — even our most benevolent intentions tend to result in actions that ripple out disturbingly into the world, with effects that accentuate the overall harm of humanity's ongoing and worsening impact. Despite our best intentions and thoughtful, careful actions, about the most we can hope for is to limit the damage we do, not prevent it. And sadly, even "minimal" harm turns out to be not very minimal at all.

Consider recycling. Back in the 1960s and 1970s (which now seem like ancient history), many new social attitudes arose. Ecology, environmentalism, and "sustainability" all took root and quickly grew into social movements that made significant inroads into the consciousness of mass culture. Back then, we noticed that products in the marketplace had shifted from longevity to disposability. The reason for this was simple: more profit for business. Designing consumer items to last and manufacturing them so they could be repaired was time-consuming, expensive, and inconvenient for both consumers and businesses. Maintaining parts inventories and skilled repair facilities ate into profit margins. The time it took to get items fixed frustrated people. By the second half of the century, we had ditched product longevity, turned to plastics, and shifted the marketplace of goods into throwaway consumption and single-use disposability.

So, the idea of recycling was proposed as a way to accommodate the new social awareness of ecology. Rather than repairing products (or not buying new and spiffier versions), we could recycle what we threw out — whether or not it was broken — and reuse the materials to create more products, thus saving on the cost of raw materials and minimizing the damage to the environment (i.e., smaller landfills, less habitat destruction). Consumers were urged to separate

their refuse into categories — garbage that would readily decompose versus rubbish that wouldn't, which could then be recycled. For awhile at least, fairly widespread compliance was achieved among the public. Second-hand shops had always existed as a layer within the marketplace of commerce, but a whole new industry sprung up for recycling aluminum, glass, paper, and plastic.

Now it's 50 years later, and the grand social experiment of recycling has, on the whole, been a spectacular failure. While unsightly landfills have been "cleaned up," meaning industrialized with much greater efficiency, and even auto junkyards have evolved into well-organized "used auto parts facilities," the goal we sought — which was to minimize environmental damage — has not been achieved. Fewer people recycle now than in decades past. In many cities, less than 40% of people recycle at all. And then, as the final irony, the bulk of what the public still dutifully recycles is not reused at all. More often than not, the recycling industry functions merely as a middle ground for trash management, a temporary holding station, just a conduit between the consumer and the landfill. All this boils down to money (for business) and convenience (for the public).

Well, OK. Here's another example: electric cars. Electric vehicles (EVs for short) powered by batteries are supposed to reduce the air pollution caused by gasoline-powered vehicles. In terms of what comes out of the tailpipe, EVs do this brilliantly. The flies in the ointment, though — and they are huge flies — are two-fold. First, the materials used in the manufacture of EVs (most significantly in the battery technology, but also in other components throughout the vehicles) are not environmentally friendly. Extraction of the required rare-earth metals and other elements have devastating and toxic environmental impacts. Second, EVs run on the existing electrical grid. Producing all that electricity is a major source of pollution.

I'm not suggesting that electric cars are worse than internal combustion vehicles. They may be slightly less damaging. That depends on which authorities one believes. But what is obviously and painfully true is that EVs are not a viable solution to humanity's destruction of the Biosphere.

So, if you don't recycle, you are contributing to the destruction of the living environment. If you do recycle, though, you are still contributing to that damage. And if you own or use cars for transportation, whether electric or gas, you are complicit with Death Culture. These two examples— recycling and electric cars — represent only the tiniest percentage of our huge dilemma. Everywhere we turn, the same terrible logic applies: computers, smart phones, and every other appliance we use contribute to humanity's rampant destruction of the Ecosphere.

And yet, how can anyone be expected to live in modern society without products or transportation? Should we all retreat to the monastery, renouncing the world by taking vows of poverty, and spend our days meditating and weeding organic gardens? That might be a viable option for one person in 10,000, but for the overwhelming majority of us, the answer is a resounding NO. For all but a

precious few of us, there is no escape from complicity. We are creatures of our times, and the times are toxic.

After a lifetime of struggle with this, my perspective on our responsibility is changing. That change is halting and occurs in fits and starts, but I do notice movement, especially over the past couple of years. I sense that I am less self-righteous than earlier in my life, less likely to point the finger of damning blame at all of us. I'm even a little less sad about our seemingly terminal situation than I was when younger. I begin to see our human predicament not so much in terms of tragedy than simple inevitability. Even though I continue to take aim at certain people I think of as monsters who have an outsized impact in making life more cruel than it needs to be, I seem to be more willing to cut the rest of us some slack.

Expecting us as a species to do better than we have strikes me more and more often as simply incorrect. Humanity has been on the wrong road for a long time, essentially since "civilization" began. Over that period (which science typically estimates to have been about 12,000 years), the vast majority of social and economic systems we've created, built, and put in place have led us inexorably to where we are now. Especially over the past millennia, and most pointedly the previous two centuries, the odds of our taking corrective steps toward living more in harmony with nature have seriously diminished. Now those possibilities for our changing direction are reaching the vanishing point. Theoretically, solutions may exist as interesting concepts, but our systems, psychology, and politics now staunchly resist all efforts to implement them. In real life, the likelihood of our doing anything even modestly effective on any scale that matters is just about zero.

In addition to my admission of the evaporating chances of getting our act together and the apparent inevitability of what's coming, perhaps this means also that I'm finally making some personal headway toward universal compassion and forgiveness. I'm a little concerned that such a congratulatory judgment may amount to giving myself way too much credit, but it nonetheless seems like a legitimate possibility. I might actually be maturing, at least a little. Maybe it's simply old age and the exhaustion of passion that comes with long illness, but even then I think it's probably a good thing. Angry blame about things we cannot change seems like such a lousy dead end. If there's anything real to this whole quasi-spiritual notion of maturity, then it should lead to greater acceptance of life as it is, rather than as I (or anyone else) would wish it to be.

I wouldn't extend acceptance all the way to seeing the world as "perfect." That would imply that all suffering is illusory, which is a bridge too far for me. Instead, I'm trying on the notion of acceptance more as acknowledgement — not just intellectually, but on an emotional level — that reality contains light *and* darkness, joy *and* suffering, sanity *and* madness — essentially, the Tao of Everything.