

Adulthood, Maturity, and Wisdom

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In spite of my wish not to impose the vagaries of my personal life on my readers, I need to start this commentary with a bit of my personal history.

Back at the end of the last century—1999 to be specific—my life went over a cliff. That fall was caused by a combination of factors: ill health primarily, but also an accumulation of questionable decisions, and a forced enrollment in the death-and-rebirth school of Plutonian spiritual teachings.

All these factors, along with some very bad luck, combined to throw my butt into a three-year purgatory, during which I took a necessary sabbatical from my career as an astrologer while I lost pretty much everything I had accumulated and suffered through a good, old-fashioned emotional breakdown.

When I was “paroled” in 2002 and began to come out the other side (pretty much crawling on my hands and knees at that point), I started to recreate myself by returning to writing, but with a new focus on the collective tragedies that were looming (and still are).

My first commentary was about changes in America, both long-term over my lifetime, and short-term in the aftermath of 9-11. Below is an excerpt from that commentary, the last page of the essay I wrote at that time, in July, 2002:

Pluto unearths the hidden rot within. Past excesses and abuses of power, however unconscious, come to light. The deluge of corporate scandals—Enron, Andersen, etc.—show fiscal reporting to be no less manipulative and deceptive than advertising hype. In our naiveté and greed, we ignored the long-term effects of placing our trust in big business. Corporate culture has been on a long binge drunk since the 1980s, but the party is over, and the hangover looks to be one hell of a social headache.

The American Dream includes lofty ideals that are truly revolutionary—representative, democratic government; freedom to speak our minds and worship as we choose without fear or repression; equality under the law, and the possibility for everyone to share in a piece of the economic pie. Those ideals have always been under siege. Periodically in American history the shadow aspect of human nature has gained the upper hand, but never more so than now. When did life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness lose all meaning except as compulsive greed for material wealth? How did corporations and the rich become so insidious in co-opting our government through influence-peddling that now they not only make the laws, but are above them to boot? What will we leave to future generations after everything has been commercialized, fouled, and discarded?

We should be ashamed of ourselves. The fact that we're not, at least not visibly, is telling. Our government's response to the crisis has been to ignore business scandals, throw out the Bill of Rights, and create an ersatz and perpetual "War on Terror" that suits certain powerful elites. I worry less about terrorists than I do the privileged "patriots" in elected office, public institutions, and corporate boardrooms who serve only themselves and their rich cronies rather than the public good.

This crisis is not about Republicans or Democrats, nor is it about liberals or conservatives. It's about honesty and integrity versus lies and illusions. It's about real versus fake freedoms. It's about protecting ourselves from ourselves by reclaiming our society from the worst impulses of our all-too-human nature.

We would do well to reflect on where we've been and where we're going in this country. It's not too late for America to change directions, but I see no evidence yet that our rulers truly understand what's at stake, nor that we as a nation have the collective will to shake off our delusions.

Astrologically, this is America's wake-up call. So far, it doesn't appear to me that we've awakened at all.

Sadly, I might just as easily have written those paragraphs yesterday as a decade ago. My perceptions then remain largely unaltered today. Yes, the numbers of people who are aware of fundamental problems in American culture and society have grown over the past years, but the percentages still remain skewed toward the unconscious (and too often toward the unconscionable, as well).

As we stand at the doorway into 2012—arguably the pivotal fulcrum in the two-decade-long transformation now underway, beyond which turbulent, radical change will become obvious—I feel a pressing need within myself to return to and expand on the concerns of that 2002 commentary.

Since every good pop song needs a hook—a short riff or catchy lyric that reaches the listener at a visceral level—here are the hooks I'll use for this commentary:

**Where have all the adults gone in America? Is there no wisdom left?
What happened to us to turn mature adulthood into a rare and endangered species?**

By "adulthood," I do not mean the simple passage of time from childhood and youth through old age. The chronological component of adulthood is the least of its qualities. In fact, for my definitions of adulthood, we can throw out age entirely. Whether one is 16 or 60 has little bearing on the adult sensibilities that are of concern here.

Adulthood in my usage of the term refers to both an ongoing process and a cumulative result that includes maturity and the distillation of wisdom on psychological, emotional, and yes, even spiritual levels.

Throughout the bulk of human history, elders have been revered in family groups and collective societies. The “old ones” were presumed to possess ineffable but substantial qualities of understanding that were usually absent in the younger cohorts of the group. Thus, when important collective decisions were needed, the elders were consulted, and their counsel received special weight in considerations of what to do.

That reverence was, of course, sometimes misplaced. As I wrote above, not everyone who achieves advanced age qualifies as a true adult. Just because someone has lived long enough to become an old fart does **not** guarantee that the person is a **wise** old fart.

The same caveats apply to just about every component of otherwise elevated status in society: education, credentialing, and expertise do not guarantee true adulthood. PhDs are not invariably wiser than high-school dropouts. In fact, some PhDs are incredibly stupid about life, while some high-school dropouts convert their experience in the School of Hard Knocks into real wisdom. Similarly, “intelligence” is no guarantee of either maturity or wisdom. Some people with stratospheric IQs are barely functional socially. Beauty fails also as an indicator of wisdom, as does social or business success. Some extraordinarily comely people don’t have a clue, and many successful businessmen are little more than empty suits. So-called “spirituality” is not maturity, either. Slapping the label “spiritual” on something or someone does not guarantee anything “higher,” more elevated, or purer (although many people think so, and many others would like us to believe that it does). No, “spiritual” leadership is just one more power category in the marketplace, like “sports hero,” or “military general.”

Basically, maturity and wisdom are like magic. (They’re not really magic, since they require both inner grace and hard work on oneself, but they *appear* magical in their end result.) The only way to know if a given human being is mature and wise is to listen to what he/she says and also watch what he/she does. Then the presence or absence of wisdom becomes apparent—sometimes quickly, other times eventually.

Sometimes people are seemingly mature and wise in certain areas while being adolescent and clueless in other areas. So, belief in wisdom or trust in maturity must be assessed on a case-by-case and situation-by-situation basis. Adulthood is not universal currency. Just because someone is “rich” in one way does not mean that he is wealthy in all ways. He may be downright impoverished in some arenas. Having admitted that, however, an important quality of wisdom is that it can, to some extent, be generalized. Whatever one learns and distills from a specific area of life-experience is not truly wisdom unless it accurately flows over into other areas, sometimes adjacent or similar, but other times far afield and

strikingly different. If distilled knowledge doesn't do that spreading out, then it remains simply a refined form of technical expertise, which may still be an achievement, but not one that indicates any special maturity. Such advanced skills deserve recognition, but not reverence. Being a great doctor or engineer or bricklayer is worthy of respect, but unless that knowledge has been transformed into wisdom about life in general, it remains mundane rather than sacred.

I don't wish to take on the academic effort of defining exhaustively what attributes make up maturity, wisdom, and adulthood. For my purposes here, it is enough to include certain obvious qualities. Patience, thoughtfulness, ability to delay gratification, concern for others and the long-term outcomes of decisions or actions, the ability to understand both simplicity and complexity, increased capacity for living with ambiguity or non-resolution, reasonably good communication skills, awareness of one's own fallibility and compassion for human failings in general, plus reverence and humility—all these are necessary components of true adulthood. There are undoubtedly others, I'm sure, but those qualities will suffice for this essay.

Is honesty a prerequisite? Not necessarily. The ability to distinguish truth from falsehood is certainly critical, but "telling the truth" in words is not always required or even possible, since "truth" and "words" are not animals from the same species.

OK, enough background on what I'm attempting to discuss. Now, let me return to and restate the central questions:

Where have all the adults gone in America? Is there no wisdom left? What happened to us to turn mature adulthood into a rare and endangered species?

I need to address those questions in reverse order, and my opinions may surprise some readers.

As to what happened to us to cause the current state of affairs surrounding our conspicuous lack of maturity and wisdom, my response is: **nothing of any profound significance**. True maturity and real wisdom have always been rare and special, and they were generally no more frequent or common in the America of previous epochs than they are now. We are—if not in provable fact at least in my opinion—no less mature or wise now than in times past. The difference between the past and the present is that more of us now have realized or are realizing that America was **never** a haven for maturity and wisdom, despite the massive amount of historical propaganda to the contrary.

History is, in effect, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. It is always mythic and—almost by definition ("his story")—fictional. Oh, the dates are usually correct, and the raw facts are often true, but the telling of the stories, especially in their moral implications, is almost always manufactured—literally

made up to suit not only the particular slant of the author, but also to reflect the general brand of vanity and hubris that hold sway in the contemporary life of a given period, meaning whenever the history was written.

To make that point more revealing, allow me to digress into another personal footnote using my own family as the example.

When they were children, all but one of my grandparents and parents went to primary and secondary school in America, just as I did later. The sole exception was my father's father, who emigrated from Germany to America as an adult in 1910, during the Ellis Island-era tidal wave of immigration from Europe. All the rest of my forebears were American for many generations back. Meriwether Lewis (of Lewis and Clark) is a distant relative on my mother's side of my family.

Every one of my family was taught American history in school, as well as being subject to the general indoctrination and programming of socially-accepted beliefs about America (meaning the stories Americans have been telling themselves about themselves...). In every individual but one, that indoctrination was embraced and maintained throughout the entire course of the person's lifetime. I was the one exception. Not that I failed to embrace what I was taught. Oh no, I embraced it all right, just like everyone else. In my case, however, the programming turned out to have a somewhat shorter half-life.

My grandparents and parents all believed in this country as a place that was created, built, and run by very smart and special people who possessed a maturity and wisdom that was exceptional in world history. They believed it when they were young, and they continued to believe it all the way to their death-beds. They died believing in the unique wisdom and extraordinary goodness of America, quite thrilled to have been Americans, convinced that this was and is the greatest country on earth. Ever.

Lord knows I too started out believing in American Exceptionalism, since that is what most Americans are taught as children. Along the path of my lifetime, however, all of the American history I was taught has been systematically challenged, questioned, and much of it has been revealed to be more myth than fact. Idealized fictions. I could go so far as to suggest that my entire life has been a long tumble down the rocky path of disillusionment, since questioning the myths of America began early for me and is in no way a recent development. Unlike my parents and grandparents, my life has been an ongoing education of changing beliefs due to revisionist history.

By way of example, here is a simplistic and crudely obvious case-in-point:

As a child of the 1950s, I grew up watching western movies and TV shows. Roy Rogers and Hopalong Cassidy in Saturday matinee B-westerns, John Wayne directed by John Ford in *The Searchers* or *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, James Arness in *Gunsmoke*, Richard Boone as Paladin in *Have Gun, Will Travel*, Chuck

Conners in *The Rifleman*, Clint Eastwood in *Rawhide*, Yul Brynner, Steve McQueen, Charles Bronson, and James Coburn in *The Magnificent Seven*, etc. The list goes on and on.

Throughout the early history of cinema and the first two decades of television, native Americans (i.e., Indians) were most often presented as primitive, uncivilized, and even as savages. Exceptions to this propaganda were rare enough to be quite shocking. The doctrine of Manifest Destiny held that White, European immigrants should take the entire American continent—or at least the middle of it—from one sea to the other because it was our divine right. We may not have succeeded in “acquiring” Canada, Mexico, or Central and South America, but the Monroe Doctrine took care of that oversight by claiming that the entire western hemisphere was ours, in spirit if not in fact, and nobody better mess with us about it.

Well, we all know what happened to the Cowboys and Indians mythology. The great American achievements of wagon trains and the Golden Spike merging the Union and Pacific railroads were tarnished by endlessly broken treaties and the Trail of Tears. Custer’s heroic Last Stand at the Little Bighorn has finally been revealed as less-than-heroic long after being superseded by the massacre at Wounded Knee.

The same ironic disenchantment from arrogant and bogus mythology applies for me to almost every area of American history. On Sunday mornings when I was a kid and there were no cartoons on the three channels of TV available back then (Sunday mornings were mostly reserved for religious programming), I often watched a show called *Industry on Parade*, made as trade union lobbying by the AFL-CIO, which invariably showed happy, productive factory workers performing the various and sundry miracles of the Industrial Revolution by making convenience goods for what would later be called the Consumer Society.

That show was one tiny example of the general mythology that held the Industrial Revolution to be the greatest thing since sliced bread, along with modern agriculture, in bringing us out of the stone age of misery and into the modern epoch of happiness.

Well, we all know what happened to the Industrial Revolution. It turned out to be not so great by polluting the planet and collectively turning too many Americans into robotic consumers addicted to convenience whose primary function is to be indentured serfs for the feudal barons of corporate America. (By the way, for those readers who might infer that I am anti-business, please don’t. I happen to believe that commerce is the life-blood of all communities. I’m just not thrilled with the criminality of predatory mega-capitalism in the commercial, economic, and financial institutions that now effectively run our country and the world. As I have written before, I deeply mistrust all “isms:” capitalism, communism, socialism, libertarianism, whatever. None of them works worth a damn when they grow gargantuan in mass societies.)

Another factor in my disillusionment is population. When I was born in 1949, world population was 2.5 billion people. Best estimates I can glean from various sources suggest that number to be somewhere close to the carrying capacity of the earth for homo sapiens. Now, however, we have just shy of seven billion human beings. This is, to use the common parlance, simply unsustainable.

The reason I would offer—not the sole cause, but a significant factor—for why the past 50 years in America seem to represent a serious erosion of maturity and wisdom is that this is the natural evolution of empire. Though the idea of an American Empire dates back nearly to the beginning of this country, it was only with World War II that we achieved obvious and sweeping Imperial status, since we were relatively unscathed by that global inferno and were effectively the only combatant left standing at its end. From 1945 on, we wore the crown of Top Dog in the World Neighborhood, and we have acted like that ever since.

The curve of empire starts out humble but blessed, then grows strong and vital, but ends up feeble and corrupt. I was born in 1949, during that middle phase of astonishing strength and vitality, and—not inconsequentially—great national wealth. Along the way, empires move from governments that seem, if not wise, at least competent, to governments that are predatory. Eventually and inevitably, all empires succumb to corruption through social stratification and a ruling class at the top that serves neither the public nor the national good, but only itself. Over the past 20 years, America reached that point of oligarchy and plutocracy. Our country is now run by elites in politics and business (and especially finance) whose monumental criminality in lining their own pockets with whatever remains of our formerly great wealth—gangsterism that was previously veiled but is now overt (think of the recent and still unfolding scandal of M.F. Global and the millions of dollars “mysteriously missing”—meaning *stolen*—from shareholder accounts. The Mafia of 1930s Chicago were little more than small-time crooks and mere pikers compared to the titanic, inconceivable criminality of the political-corporate syndicate that runs our country today.

When referring to these powerful, privileged, and protected criminals—such as Jamie Gorman, CEO of Morgan Stanley, to cite just one sleazebag among way too many—even discussing wisdom seems absurd, but let me make a general statement: To assert that the ruling elites have no wisdom is silly. They don’t have *no* wisdom, they just have about the same bell curve distribution of wisdom that would be found in the average demographic of any local bar. Sadly, that is not close to enough, given the monumental powers and responsibilities we’ve collectively given them. Unfortunately, those at the very top of the power hierarchy possess great cunning, but precious little wisdom. It’s tough to be wise when one is a sociopath surrounded by other sociopaths in a small-club corporate culture and federal government that regards such perversity as “normal.”

So, to put the exclamation mark on this section of the commentary, what happened is that wisdom fled the corridors of power in America, which are now filled with reprehensible scoundrels who are so habituated to lying, cheating, and stealing that they know no other way to be. As to where wisdom went, I would suggest that it spread out and now resides invisibly among the mass of ordinary Americans, where millions of relatively wise people coexist right alongside tens of millions of others who don't have a clue but are about to be rudely awakened.

This is, I think, very much like the ancient parable of the Sufi Master who lives in the village, quietly plying his mundane trade as a blacksmith. He reveals his Mastery (i.e., his wisdom) only to those who can recognize it. To everyone else, he remains just the village blacksmith. He doesn't become a rich businessman who then runs for Mayor, for that path is the very opposite of what his wisdom teaches and how he needed to live to earn the wisdom in the first place.

The people who inhabit corporate boardrooms and high political office today are the same kind of "pod people" I scorned in high school. Yes, they were popular, good-looking, and ridiculously ambitious for recognition and social prestige back then and still are today, but to my way of thinking they were jerks and posers then, and they're still jerks and posers now.

Writer Dmitri Orlov, who lived through the collapse of the Soviet Union and has emerged as one of the most prescient voices concerning the coming collapse of modern civilization, held that the Russian people were very well prepared for the sudden termination of that totalitarian state from bankruptcy and inner rot, because they were already lean and hardened from decades of abysmal privation, injustice, and institutional malfeasance. As a result, the Russian people held few illusions about the supposed wisdom of those in power. They had a long history of not depending on their government or business to provide them with what they needed. So, when the collapse of the Soviet empire occurred, the people adapted—not without difficulty, of course, but with a high degree of pluck and resourcefulness. Even as Russia descended into gangsterism during the dark days following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the people survived.

In stark contrast, Orlov holds that Americans are the least-prepared of any nation for the changes looming in the years ahead. We are, he says, alienated from each other and from community itself, politically uninformed and neutered, chronically habituated to our conveniences, hypnotized by the bread-and-circuses media that's controlled by our corporate masters, and deeply dependent on the state for support of basic needs—more so than the populations of any other major society on earth. Orlov anticipates that Americans are in for a brutally hard time as the fabric of our culture—already threadbare from the looting (on an unimaginable scale) of the common wealth by the ultra-rich powers-that-be—is torn to shreds by the now-unavoidable financial and economic disasters that loom on the horizon, setting into motion the domino-effect cascading breakdown of institutions, with serious social disruption

following soon after. And that collapse is already well underway. It's just not obvious or easily visible yet.

I respect Orlov's work, and he may be right that we're in for a hard time. I hold out some hope, however, for the re-emergence of the invisible wisdom now dispersed throughout our society in the hearts and minds of millions of sane and mature individuals. These people—the real adults—already have an uneasy sense of what's coming and will certainly do whatever they can to find the passages and smooth the way through the tumultuous changes that will soon be upon us. They may be joined after the fact by millions of others who quickly shake off the shock of unpleasant awakening and rise to the occasion.

Not that my optimism is boundless. While I am a participant in civilization, and to some extent a beneficiary of its products, I'm not much of a fan, and I'm sure as hell not a cheerleader for its not-so-tender mercies.

I look back on my lifetime as an American, on the past two centuries of the Industrial and Technological Revolutions, and on the past 11,000 years of civilization created by the onset of agriculture, and I am less than thrilled with our so-called "achievements." The harshest opinion I have, however, is not that we have done so badly, but rather that we have done about as well as we could with the available wisdom we had.

In the crises, upheavals, and even the opportunities that lie ahead, we're going to need a lot more wisdom than we currently possess.