

Castles in the Sky

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During the nine years I lived in the small town of Florence on the mid-Oregon coast, I asked numerous native Florentines if they were worried about the inevitable major offshore earthquake and the devastating tsunami to follow that were already 50 years overdue and could happen at any time. Like them, I had lived through the unnerving experience of the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami. The sirens in Florence had gone off in the middle of the night, and everyone who lived in a low-lying area near the ocean shore (as I did) had to evacuate their homes and drive to the city convention center on higher ground to await the impact of the potentially dangerous wave rolling eastward across the Pacific. As it turned out, however, the wave that reached Florence the next morning was only six inches, not the five to eight feet that had been feared. Still, the experience was a serious wake-up call.

The sections of the earth's crust under the ocean off the coast of Cascadia (Washington and Oregon) in the Pacific northwest — two adjacent tectonic plates named Juan de Fuca and Gorda — are slowly moving east and sliding under the larger North American plate along a north-south line about 50 miles offshore. Every so often after a build-up of pressure along that seismic fault, a major slip occurs, causing a huge earthquake that generates a massive tsunami tidal wave. The last time this happened was in the year 1700, when an earthquake estimated to have been 9.0 magnitude caused a 50-foot tidal wave that just moments later devastated the entire coastal ecosystem, inundating areas as far inland as the current city of Portland.

The narrative legends of the Native American tribes that lived along the shore at that time tell of this natural catastrophe, and — assuming you know what to look for and where — physical evidence of that tsunami can still be seen today as one drives along Coastal Highway 101 that runs from California all the way north to Vancouver, Canada. The 1700 event, a full century before Lewis and Clark reached the Pacific, was a very big deal, although relatively few humans lived in the region at the time.

According to the well-researched geologic record (sedimentary layers, fossils, tree rings, etc.), the average interval between these major disruptions is about 300 years, which means that the next big quake and tsunami that will impact Oregon and Washington are already overdue. The chances of a major natural disaster along the Pacific Northwest coast within 50 years are estimated at about

one in ten, and those odds increase with each passing decade. The question is not *IF* another massive earthquake and huge tsunami are coming, but *WHEN*. One obvious difference between the 1700 event and the one yet to occur is the number of people whose lives will be dramatically affected. Three centuries ago, the human population of the Cascadia coast and the immediate inland region was less than 10,000. The current population of that same region (which includes the cities of Seattle and Portland) is now almost eight million.

And yet, when I asked people I knew in Florence if they were worried, to a person they all replied with some version of, *"No, I've lived here my entire life; nothing's happened, and I don't worry about it."* Beyond that lack of concern, no one seemed particularly well-prepared in terms of planning for evacuation, shelter, or emergency supplies. It's the Mad Magazine, Alfred E. Neuman stance: *"What, me worry?"*

On the one hand, that attitude is nuts, just completely insane. Being in denial about something that will inevitably occur and could have profoundly harmful repercussions for oneself and others seems to me a clear case of willful self-delusion — the proverbial fool's paradise, akin to building castles in the sky. On the other hand, human beings are not equipped to handle perpetual anxiety. Constant worry makes life not worth living. Our characteristic way of dealing with that is to ignore the danger by banishing it from our awareness.

Is there a middle ground here? In this particular real-life example, we might suggest that living in a low-lying coastal zone isn't a wise choice. And yet, human beings love to reside at the boundary of land and water. There's a beauty and profundity in living on that physical edge that is soul-nourishing. Living in such places enhances our appreciation of life on this amazing planet.

Might we suggest that choosing to live on higher ground a bit further inland might be the Baby Bear's porridge solution? Not too hot in terms of anxiety, as living in a tsunami zone could be, but not too cold, either, as moving far inland and giving up that astonishing beauty and sublime meaning would entail. Well, maybe, but maybe not. They say the heart wants what it wants, and to resist that is not only pointless, but really not even possible. Just look at all of the unreasonable and downright foolish risks humans take in pursuit of romance and sex, so perhaps it's equally true for where we reside and how we live.

I absolutely loved where I lived in Florence. I was gobsmacked that a person of modest means — such as I am — would get the chance to live in such an oh-my-God beautiful location. Such places are generally reserved for the very rich. That nine years was like a gift from the gods. It was as if the cosmos said to me, *"OK, you just suffered a stroke that should have killed you, but we're not done with you yet, so we'll offer you the compensation of a beautiful, soul-inspiring place to live. How 'bout that?"*

The point of all this storytelling is that it gets me thinking about our collective situation, for both better and worse.

Over the past two decades, it has become painfully obvious to me that we aren't going to do a goddamned thing to seriously address our ravaging of the natural environment and its terrible consequences — toxic chemicals; pollution of air, land, and water; and climate disruption — wrought by the extractive industries and false economic efficiencies of modern civilization. Oh yes, endless discussion is ongoing (and will continue) about alternative, renewable energy sources, sustainability or resilience, and "green new deals," but none of that will come close to correcting the problem. Collectively, we are deluded and in denial, with our heads stuck implacably in the sand. We are simply unwilling to change the way we live.

As for why this is so (and who's responsible for this whole mess), some people lay the blame squarely at the feet of predatory capitalism, and there's certainly a strong argument to support that. Capital doesn't give a shit about human wellness. It seeks only to increase itself. Economics dominates our choices. In effect, money becomes the only value that matters. Other critics of modern civilization focus their ire on the systemic, institutional problem of corporations and/or the Pentagon, and for obvious reasons. Business and the military thrive on Death Culture. Still others suggest that the wealthy and powerful elites are the true culprits, and that's equally compelling in some ways. For much of the 1%, the rest of us are just fodder to keep the machinery running.

Still, such finger-pointing doesn't tell the whole story and, in at least some ways, obscures more than it illuminates. The overarching issue seems to me to lie in our attitudes about human nature.

Now, writing about "human nature" is a very tricky proposition. Is it really so clear and obvious? I think it not only possible but likely that we (as members of the human species, *homo sapiens sapiens*) are much more variable and malleable than we typically believe. Our tendency is to look around us at the world, to recognize certain patterns that repeat over and over, then to attribute those patterns to assumptions about some vaguely universal set of human characteristics and proclivities, often as a fixed hierarchy of motivations.

My take on this is that we often mistake as universal motivational qualities that are not. Instead, these supposedly innate qualities arise more visibly at certain times and places in history, stimulated by a variety of factors, many of which have precious little to do with anything essential in our nature.

Take, as examples, motivations such as greed or cruelty. These qualities swirl powerfully in the zeitgeist of modern civilization. Some people say that humans have always been selfish and cruel, that both are universals in human nature, and that our hoping for these to change is essentially pissing into the wind. I'm not so sure, though. Witnessing the presence of greed or disdain in our

world is certainly an accurate perception, but the assumption that those currents in human behavior are tied to “basic, universal, and fixed human nature” seems to me very suspect.

No, I don't deny that the potential for greed and cruelty lurk in most everyone to one degree or another. However, I think the presumption that such qualities are universal as core motivations and must remain the fundamental basis for personal behavior and social interactions is false. Humans are both hard and soft, cruel and kind, selfish and selfless, loving and uncaring. To focus only on one of each pair is little more than narrative, like a fictional story or frightening fairy tale. This is the parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant writ large.

One might presume that my attitude about all this should give me comfort about the possibilities of our moving from Death Culture to a more harmonious and life-sustaining form of civilization. And to some extent, it does. I simply don't accept the opinion that “it's always been this way and always will.” Whether we refer to Ira and George Gershwin: *“It Ain't Necessarily So”* or to William Shakespeare: *“There is more to Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than is contained in your philosophy”* — ample counters can be cited.

The problem for me is that there's another thread concerning human nature and related to what I've written so far in this commentary that comes in from a different angle and undercuts the optimism.

Sadly, I think that humans are simply not capable of dealing with such complex realities as modern civilization. The biological reference for this is our evolution through small kinship bands of 75 people or less in limited but relatively stable and predictable localized environments. That's the long-term basis of our genetic heritage, but it leaves us ill-prepared to deal effectively with the bewilderingly complicated challenges of the modern world.

Another way to think about this is through a metaphysical-spiritual perspective. In many such mythic narratives, we are a young species that attracts souls and spirits eager for experience, but which are not very mature in the ultimate scheme of things. We humans are not Masters of the Universe, but the fervor of our youthful vitality inclines us (or at least some of us) to imagine, think, and believe that we are. In other words, we're babies who dream of being adults.

In that sense, the problem isn't any particular group of “bad” people. It's all of us. I'm not sure who frightens me more: the people who are actively creating Death Culture, or the ones who seem so certain that they know how to fix it.

I see the reality of our not being in charge in every individual I've ever known (including myself). Accepting responsibility is challenging, of course, but can be achieved, at least in part. Controlling any environment, however, is a horse of an entirely different color. Try as we might, and despite our many apparent

successes, some of which are quite astonishing, everything we humans create eventually breaks, falls apart, or fails.

From a practical perspective, that's OK. Many facets of our lives can be repaired or renewed. We've been working on learning to do that for a long time, and we've made some progress. Compared to our former successes, however, the kind of massive, systemic failures we're now confronting in the modern world are of a different order of magnitude. Even when we have the will to repair what's broken or heal what's damaged, we don't possess the agency or the understanding. No amount of faith in our gumption or chutzpah will suffice. Over my 72 years, I've gradually come around to considering the idea that we're simply not far enough along in maturity and wisdom.

I hesitate to call what I'm about to write a "conclusion," since the jury is still out and I'm very aware of my own fallibility, but, more and more, it looks to me that much of what has (inevitably) gone wrong in civilization probably cannot be fixed, at least not by us. At the level of collective creativity to build harmonious social structures and graceful economic and political systems, or even to interact with each other in moderately loving ways, we humans have never really been in control of the fractured worlds we've created, are clearly not in control now, and, so it seems to me, are unlikely to gain control any time soon.

Rather than being in denial about this, I'm trying to face and accept it. That's a tough pill to swallow, of course, given the slippery slope of melancholic despair about our future. The key to avoiding that trap seems to me to lie in an enlarged experience of compassion — changing the *Us versus Them* equation to include everyone and everything as *Us* and reducing *Them* to zero.

In part, that means diminishing the hatred of others that is inspired by fear. More deeply, though, it means eliminating our tendency for complete disregard. Out of sight, out of mind. Simply not caring about other lives — whether human or not — is far too easy and convenient for us. The result of that failing is a world with too much suffering for which most of us are unconsciously complicit.

So far, for me at least, achieving anything close to universal compassion and heartfelt care for all sentient beings is still beyond my grasp. I do experience occasional glimpses in moments where I feel it, but, as an ongoing state of consciousness, it's still very much touch and go.