

The Eagle and the Condor

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I read an article this week entitled “The Court of Ecological Awareness” by Chicago journalist Robert Koehler that was both compelling and disturbing to me. Here’s a link to the article online:

<https://www.counterpunch.org/2022/02/15/the-court-of-ecological-awareness/>

In his piece, Koehler states that *“more than a thousand lawsuits [have been] filed around the world — including a few in the United States — challenging corporate or governmental negligence about climate change and ecosystem damage.”* He goes on to assert that the lawsuits may have a significant cumulative impact on the global politics of climate disruption, and he ties these lawsuits to a nascent social movement called *“The Rights of Nature.”*

Koehler’s article contained two quotes that caught my interest. The first was by Tiffany Challe from the Columbia University Climate School web site:

“It [The Rights of Nature movement] is led by activists advocating for ecosystems such as rivers, lakes, and mountains to bear legal rights in the same, or at least a similar, manner as human beings. This movement is striving for a paradigm shift in which nature is placed at the center and humans are connected to it in an interdependent way, rather than a dominant one.”

The underlying sentiment of that quote — that nature deserves the same respect and consideration as humans — has my wholehearted agreement. In my life, that feeling goes back to my earliest childhood, and then more pointedly to my commune days of the late 1960s and 1970s. The notion of the sacred interdependence of all life has been foundational in my thinking ever since.

When I was younger, I hoped that “ecological awareness” would eventually gain traction and spread throughout society. In some ways it has, but not in a manner that really counts (i.e., the “bottom line”). Polls routinely report that the American public overwhelmingly supports environmental protections, but that opinion is not reflected in our unrestrained industrial development, investment of capital, or rampant no-holds-barred consumerism. Along with many other promising perspectives from the 1960s, our flagrant disregard for the environment has been a crushing disappointment. When living in harmony

with nature becomes inconvenient or gets in the way of the economic pursuit of material wealth, we've seen time and again that nature loses.

I believe that trying not to harm others and the world is a good starting point, but, as is the case with so many of our good intentions, getting down to the nitty-gritty of doing that in real life is more complicated than it might seem. For one thing, defining "harm" is sometimes clear, but often not. The same applies to assessment of responsibility or "blame" for harm done. Sometimes it's obvious, but other times not. Then there's legality. The world we live in invokes laws — tens of thousands of them — to codify what is and isn't permitted, and to assign penalties for transgression.

I'm not entirely resolved with legality and the courts. The whole concept of "rights" seems to me an artificial (and questionable) human invention. I accept courts as a means to resolve interpersonal or social conflicts, but I have some concerns about the use of the law as a vehicle to enforce social engineering, especially when it comes to legislating morality.

The second quote that got my attention in the article was from the *Pachamama Alliance*, a group founded by the Achuar people, an indigenous native tribe from the Rain Forest that borders Peru and Ecuador:

"...we are at a moment in history when the Eagle — representing intellect and the mind — and the Condor — representing wisdom and the heart — must come together to ensure the continued existence of humankind."

I'm not an academic or a trained anthropologist, so my knowledge of the myths of indigenous cultures is only anecdotal. While I'm far from uneducated, I can't claim to know every myth that's out there. That particular symbolic metaphor contrasting the Eagle to the Condor had never crossed my path before. It resonates nicely, however, with much of my own writing — both recently and from much further back in time — about the critical importance of tempering raw, primal power with the guiding lights of love and wisdom.

When I was a child in the 1950s, I was bathed in the propaganda narrative that indigenous cultures were "primitive," while civilization (by which was meant mainly western culture — Europe and specifically America) was "advanced." Literally, that's what I was taught in school. The not-so-subtle implication was that "primitive" people were innocent, child-like, superstitious, and almost stupid, whereas "advanced" people (like us) were sophisticated, adult, and oh-so-smart.

By the time I was 20, I had completely rejected that bullshit story, along with American Exceptionalism and white superiority. Apparently, the rest of the world didn't, especially the monsters, who continue to act as if they know everything (and, in addition, assume that whatever they don't know isn't worth knowing

and doesn't matter). They are wrong, though — dead wrong — and their hubris carries tragic consequences for the rest of us.

I've never understood the disconnect that humans feel toward nature. Why do we seem to believe that we're separate from all other life and immune from suffering the ill effects of trashing our environment? Why do we insist on trying to conquer and subdue nature rather than at least attempt to cooperate with her? Why do we regard the earth as lifeless matter whose only value for us is economic? While I've studied psychology and history and know quite a bit about the long road we took to dig ourselves into this predicament, comprehending how human beings can be so short-sighted and arrogant continues to elude me.

Qualities such as greed and material self-interest obviously have considerable relevance here, but they are finally unsatisfying as "answers." I mean, they're just so crude and obvious as profoundly negative traits that it's hard for me to believe the origins of our collective madness could be that simple. Yes, we are the proverbial dragon eating its own tail, and we don't seem to have the common sense not to shit where we eat, but surely the reasons for that are multi-faceted and complex.

But maybe not. Perhaps the reasons behind our collectively suicidal behaviors, our shameless lack of conscience, and our endless justifications for continuing to participate in business-as-usual actually do have ridiculously simple causes. I don't know.

What to do about the monsters destroying the world (and perhaps killing the rest of us in the process) is a terrible problem with no easy solutions. I decided quite awhile ago that reform would not effectively prevent or even slow these horrors. I concluded that, despite our best efforts, the only way the monsters could be stopped would be through their own overreach and the inevitable crash of modern civilization.

I've spent the first two decades of the 21st century waiting for collapse. Frankly, I've been amazed and sorely impressed by the ability of the monsters to stave off social disintegration and keep the massive con game going while they work unremittingly to steal just about everything that isn't nailed down, basically whatever remains of the wealth and goodies they haven't already grabbed for themselves. Whatever else we may say about the monsters, they're clearly very smart and well organized.

What's surprised me most about these early years of the 2020s is that I expected more breakdown to occur at the level of physical systems — the electrical grid, the financial realm, food production and distribution — arenas like that, which form the most tangible day-to-day supports for the ways we live. I presumed that collapse through overreach would occur in structural failures or disruptions to those systems.

Instead of systemic collapse, however, what seems to be happening is much less tangible, taking the form of a mass breakdown in psychological and even psychic ways. Put in the simplest terms, we're collectively going crazy — losing our friggin' minds. The COVID pandemic is the most obvious background for this collective loss of sanity and descent into madness, but COVID is more symptomatic than causal. What the pandemic has revealed is how little it takes to unhinge us. We're already so far down the road to Crazy Town that major catastrophes like nuclear war or natural disasters such as drought, famine, fire, and flood aren't even necessary to show how completely lost we are. An invisible virus was all it took to accomplish that revelation.

But then, the vulnerabilities of our hyper-complexity are not just a physical phenomenon. The vast majority of us have become slaves in a world where even the most marginal control over our lives is next to impossible. As long as things work, we manage to persevere from one day to the next. However, when things break — as they do more and more frequently — we are often unable to fix them, at least not by ourselves. And sometimes the help that is supposed to be available doesn't help at all and just makes matters worse. We find ourselves forced to rely on a world that is less and less competent.

Civilization has always advertised more than it could deliver, but increasingly it makes promises it can't keep. These days, many of the carrots dangled in front of the proverbial donkey are not even real, but just empty illusions. To the donkey, they may look and even smell like carrots, but they're not food at all. And when the donkey refuses to go for the fake carrot, the masters turn to the stick.

Even worse than things breaking down around us that too often can't be fixed, when *we* break — as is happening more frequently and pretty much across the board — we can't fix *us*.