

Hard Truths

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As a general rule, human beings do not like reality. We much prefer fantasy and illusion. The problem with reality, of course, is that it is built around a foundation of hard truths — unforgiving, unyielding, matter-of-fact, and not at all concerned with the temperamental homeostasis of human comfort in action, repose, or conscience. In short, we don't like to be disturbed from our idyllic reveries or awakened from our oh-so-pleasant dreams. We want what we experience to *resemble* reality, but not *be* reality. We hope to have an exemption from life's harshness, a kind of get-out-of-jail-free card. And sometimes we do — for awhile. Inevitably, though — sooner or later — the hard truths of reality arrive and make their presence felt.

For the uber-powerful and/or ultra-wealthy, one hard truth is that you can't take it with you. Illness and the infirmities of aging come for the vast majority of us (some sooner than others, but basically everyone). The stories we hear about the 95-year-old who's never been sick a day in his or her life are almost certainly BS. But whether we spend the bulk of our lives relatively well or seriously ill, death ultimately makes sure that no one gets out of here alive.

Another particularly hard truth is that in the overall scheme of things, human impact on the living ecosystem is — inevitably — negative. Our spectacular success as a species has come at the cost of degrading and destroying the very environment that fosters and supports our lives and all other life on this planet. In general, life works by interdependent symbiosis. One species' imbalances and excesses foster the flourishing of other species, and once upon a time, long ago, we were part of that. But modern humanity has overwhelmed this elegant system. We seem destined to damage or kill nearly everything we touch.

Human beings do not like this hard truth — and many others, such as our disdain (sometimes literally murderous) for people we regard as "Them" rather than "Us". We'll do just about anything to avoid acknowledging hard truths. At least three primary strategies are routinely employed to achieve this denial.

The first is comforting falsehoods. We tell ourselves stories — fictional narratives — about how everything will be OK, how our human ingenuity and technological prowess will solve the energy crisis and pollution/toxicity and economic insanity and war and all the other related issues — food, medicine, sex, gender, class, privilege, reproduction, population, et al — that beset us in the modern world. Society and civilization aren't fucked (or so we say); we just haven't gotten our act together yet. Surely we can do better, either by going back to more

traditional values (conservatism) or by moving forward to better values (progressivism). We like these fictions and see them everywhere in society. They amount to false stories about ourselves that we tell ourselves to feel good about ourselves.

The second strategy is separation from nature. Civilization has produced and instilled in us numerous philosophies — religious or secular — which claim that we are not part of nature. Earlier, pre-“civilized” humans would have mocked such assumptions, but far too many of us have come to believe them.

The third and, in some ways, most common strategy is to remain unconscious and unaware, completely oblivious to the hard truth of human damage to ourselves and the environment. This strategy is more difficult to implement, for it requires constant distraction to succeed, but when it works, it works brilliantly.

Distraction is everywhere around us in the form of seduction — carrots dangled in front of our donkey selves. [Donkeys aren’t actually that dumb, but we are...] We are bathed in an ocean of lies about how we can and should have everything we want. Not only that, but we should have it right now, not tomorrow or next year, but immediately — today, this instant. Just do whatever the hell you want, and by all means don’t consider the consequences — whether unintended or not — to yourself, to others, or to the world around you. Our complicity with Death Culture has turned us all into criminals.

I’m not talking about literal criminals here — monsters with bad intent — but rather inadvertent or *de facto* criminals, mostly accessories after the fact. Yes, there are monsters in the world. Real evil does exist. But much of the human evil in the world is done by people who do not consider themselves evil at all. On the contrary, most of us would never intentionally harm ourselves, others, or the world. All too often, though, we are blissfully unaware of the negative repercussions of our attitudes, beliefs, and actions.

Most commonly, a combination of the three strategies works best. We separate ourselves from nature and are blithely oblivious to the harm we do, but when that fails — when the hard truths of reality unexpectedly penetrate the veil of our unconsciousness and reveal the belief in our presumed superiority to be false — we then switch strategies on a dime and resort to fictional story-telling. Yes, we grudgingly admit, there are serious problems, but we can and will fix them. On top of that, the terrible dilemmas we’ve so recently become aware of must be someone else’s fault, not ours. We are good people and certainly not to blame.

But here’s the rub: As damning as all this seems, who can assert with cosmic certainty that it’s not a reasonable way to approach our situation? Even if we knew how (which we often don’t), changing the destructive ways we live would completely disrupt our own lives and society. It would mean giving up almost all the conveniences of modern life. So, we come up with fake solutions that won’t resolve the issues we need to deal with and may make them worse. (Think electric cars, wind farms, or nuclear energy). We even wage “wars” we can’t possibly win against any idea or concept we don’t like — poverty, crime, drugs,

terrorism. All of that may seem ridiculous and absurd, but what if it's actually the best we can do? What then?

The only true and effective solution to so much of what ails us is to invoke the First Rule of Holes: "*When you realize you're in a hole you've dug that you can't get out of, the first thing to do is STOP DIGGING.*" Sadly, this is not a solution that appeals to our neuro-biology. Brains like rhythm and repetitive patterns. Once routinized (meaning built and turned on), a patterned brain circuit of chained neural firing that releases dopamine (comfort, happiness, pleasure, whatever) tends to repeat, over and over and over, ad infinitum. No matter what particular habit or behavior pattern a given circuit is associated with, we humans aren't good at turning off those circuits, even if they're killing us.

The great problem of human life is not learning, but UN-learning. Habit drives us, along with desire, and MORE is almost always preferable to LESS.

They say that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. The key in that truism is not the teaching of new tricks. It's the fact that the dog is old, already filled to the brim with innate routines or previously learned habits. There's just no room in the dog's brain for instilling new routines and habits that challenge old ones. Even for humans, with our long gestations and extended childhoods, the die tends to be cast early on. Even the hard-won wisdom of maturity after a lifetime of experience is unlikely to completely neutralize our early conditioning. What does achieve this change from one state to another are the hard truths that we wear out and break down.

By contrast, some people seemingly don't mature at all. For whatever reasons, their inner damage hardens as they age, overtaking the gentler dimensions of selfhood. Some humans turn monstrous early on. Others devolve into that role.

So, does distilled consciousness not matter? Do maturity and wisdom make no positive difference? No, I'd suggest that they indeed make a difference, but that the positive results of long-term maturation and hard-won wisdom tend to be effective at the individual level, but ineffective at the larger scale of collective human impact. For every person who achieves some authentic personal transformation through whatever means, from discipline to serendipity, and as a result transcends the illusions so loved by the ego, thus refraining from domination, greed, or cruelty, a hundred other younger, impassioned fools step forward to take his place running the machines of Death Culture.

By the time anyone really knows his ass from a hole in the ground, the damage to the world has already been done. As the old saying goes, those who know tend not to say, and — more to the point — they are likely to retire from the insanity of the marketplace and retreat to the sanctuary of the monastery. Many old soldiers have learned the hard way that war is cruel folly, but there are always eager, gung-ho youngsters willing to take their place on the battlefield.

But wait. Are there no pleasing truths? Oh yes, many of them. For instance, I think it safe to say that most human beings are well-intentioned, and that

many are open-hearted and sincere. It's just that with that insight and five bucks, you can get a cappuccino. At the level of the collective and our wanton abuse of ourselves, others, and the world, that goodness doesn't carry much, if any, weight. After all, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

In other words, the pleasing truths don't neutralize the hard truths or minimize their disconcerting impact. Part of the reason for that is that we aren't in denial about the pleasing truths. We embrace them willingly, eagerly receiving all the benefits they confer. So, when it comes time to face the hard truths, we've already used up all the pleasing truths. They can't be a force held in reserve, like the cavalry riding to the rescue.

No, the pleasing truths are all well and good in their own ways, but so what? They won't save us from our foolishness, nor from reality's eventual blowback. Nothing will. Whatever metaphor we choose to apply — nature bats last, you can't fight City Hall, or Casino house rules — harsh reality ultimately wins out over our cherished illusions.

The good news (if we can call it that) is that harsh reality rarely claims victory all at once. Most of the time, the many hard truths of life don't gang up on us together in the same moment. They assault us in fits and starts, shocking us to awaken from our fantasies and illusions first here, then later there. For whatever reasons, we do seem to get a lot of temporary reprieves. I'd say probably more than we actually deserve, but I don't think that "deserving" has much to do with anything in this realm.

Sure, on the rarest of occasions, exceedingly cataclysmic disasters can and have occurred. The meteor that smashed into the Yucatan peninsula 65 million years ago and wiped out the dinosaurs was one such event. But even that apocalypse had an unexpected bright side in the subsequent rise and flourishing of small mammals, which led eventually to us. Life is both resourceful and resilient.

Every species that has ever lived on the earth eventually goes extinct. They all have their own time on the planet, their hour to strut and fret upon the stage, just as humans are having ours now. I'd imagine that for some species their culminating act was perhaps less spectacular than ours is. There's a pretty good likelihood, however, that after we're gone, something else — some new form of life — will arise to take our place.

Maybe it won't be extinction that happens to us. Perhaps it will be assimilation, as occurred with Neanderthals, or maybe it will be the Singularity. One way or another, though, it does appear that humans (as we've been) are headed out, since who we are, what we do, and how we live are quickly reaching the limits where a whole bunch of very hard truths are now kicking in.

I don't mean to be ghoulish about our future prospects or possible demise, but perhaps the hard truths aren't so bad after all. Maybe this is just what life does.