

When It Happens

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Dying comes. It surprises us in what it is because we don't know what to expect. It happens in us, in some way—I am no prognosticator—and then, we are dead.

What happens after the dying, if anything, is unknown. It is thoroughly unknown. At least, that is how I have concluded that death must be faced. We face whatever death is in the way in which we are each built to face it. But none of us living people know what that way is, or whether it is the same for all, or whether everyone experiences what they expect or believe occurs after dying, because dead people reveal nothing.

Distinguish with me *death* and *dying*. *Dying* is the always mysterious, often hideous struggle to continue breathing when the body perceives that cessation of breathing cannot be halted. It is this *dying* that we fear. And I suppose that every mature person who has the boldness to face his or her inevitable future fears the process of becoming dead. It is

sometimes painful. It is sometimes quick and silent, unforetold. It is always a separation from someone or something loved—even if it comes down simply to the dying of one’s ego that is loved and must be given up. In dying, everyone loses what is dearest and surest.

Then what? This answer no one knows. Many believe one or another of various “afterlife” prospects. But belief is simply the preservation of stories in one’s heart. For example, if you hold the knowledge of the “afterlife” which your religion teaches, what do you actually have? A story. That’s all. Is it true? No one knows, though many believe.

What does this tell us about believing? Believing is one’s spiritual response to pain, suffering, or the presumed onset of dying. In the face of these fearful crushers of the human spirit, the spirit constructs a story which embodies that person’s hope for what comes after dying—or else, and more likely, the person’s spirit accepts a story that someone (parent, priest, rabbi, shaman, imam, . . .) has told that person about what to expect after dying. That’s all—just a story—and indeed, a story which no one can validate as true because in all our two million years of human evolutionary history, absolutely no one has ever been able to produce for us conclusive

first-hand evidence or testimony about the circumstance which we might call “after-dying.”

For, indeed, each of these accounts of after-dying is as whispery and diaphanous as a dream. Each is a hope deferred, a blessing awaited, a joy anticipated. What is missing in each of them is a way to determine their validity in reality.

We do not even know how to articulate the experience of death—of whatever follows dying, if anything actually does. Can we call it “being dead”? I don’t think so because the verb *being* implies an on-going state of existence. The phrase “being dead” means that individual consciousness persists after dying, for better or for worse. For some, that state of “afterlife” might seem inviting. Other people might see eternal afterlife as horrid and painful.

That is especially true for those who believe in a God which is somehow separate or distinguishable from them as individuals. If it turns out that “after-dying” is actually as I was taught as a child to believe—that there is a kindly God who loves all of us and welcomes us into the peaceful kingdom, then, good for us, and good for God. I, for one, will be pleasantly surprised, I suppose, to be existing in such paradisaical circumstances. It

would be a welcome result, I suppose, but I don't expect after-dying to be so.

On the other hand, in after-dying we may be the victims of an all-powerful but uncompromising God who is exactly what many fear: a vengeful God whose eyes are set on us! What if he/it is a terrorizing deity who expects his Christians to forgive each other, but who himself does not forgive? Then like all the rest of humanity, I suppose, we are tanked. That would be unpleasant. But I am consoled by my expectation that after-dying is not that. – If I am wrong here, then God will have all his faithful and dutiful devotees over in one corner, huddled like sheep, and the rest of us goats will continue to get into trouble, and be condemned, and remain stewing painfully in our everlasting hour of regret and shame.

Things could be worse. Perhaps it is the Tibetan Buddhists who have the most accurate view of after-dying: that the whole purpose of that experience is to test your spiritual perfection by scaring you into facing the decision to continue to endure the pain of the fear, or to choose to re-enter the world of causality and suffering. I think I won't worry about that one too much. Spiritual perfection is a long way off for me. So, if I get scared into returning, that's what will happen. So?

My current thinking about after-dying is this. None of it matters. None of the stories matter, that's for sure. They're all stories advocating good behavior, or at least, hope. But I think that *trying* to be good in the areas in which I am naturally inept at being good leads nowhere. If I am good at opening doors for people, that is not my choice—that is my nature. It is part of the “package” of who I am. I deserve no praise or reward for that.

And if I am bad at something—say, giving five bucks to a homeless guy on the street—likewise, that is my nature, and I deserve neither condemnation for it nor instruction on how to be better—unless I ask for that instruction.

All of us are good and bad, depending on the situation and our experience with similar prior situations, and on how we feel that day, and on the availability of the time or money necessary to accomplish the task. That is, what I can control about such situations of good actions I *do* control according to my nature. I do who I am. That's all.

To try to be something that I think I *should* be without genuinely *being* it is a farce, a falsehood, a pretense, a lie to myself and to other people. What do I gain by showing off my generosity to other people if it is

not heartfelt? In that case, I am simply paying for praise or satisfaction of my own vanity. Doing that is not generosity. It is nonsense.

So I try to behave genuinely toward others and I try to accept others as behaving genuinely toward me (unless I feel their pretense.) And I expect nothing in this life nor in the after-dying as reward or punishment for that. I expect that I will simply evaporate—that my consciousness, my essential “me” will simply dissolve into the void in which existence occurs. When that happens, I will not “be dead.” I will simply no longer exist—not a trace of me.

But that is not the whole of it. I accept and carry with me the recognition of a universal binding entity in which every thing exists. I realize that I exist in this entity every time my mind turns toward the realities of my place or portion or condition in the world. I accept that I truly exist. I am not a spirit who imagines a body or a body whose chemistry concocts the notion of a spirit. I am a whole integrated thing: more than simple—or super-complex—biochemistry; less than self-sufficient. I cannot account for my existence, certainly not through the power of my willing my existence—nor through the wonders of modern biochemistry.

My understanding of this universal entity and of my relation to it is this. This entity, which I call, un-uniquely, “the Source,” is that which exists. The Source is everything which exists, with respect to its quality of existence. This computer monitor before me, and the pen beside it, and the papers scattered around it, and I, typing the words of my story into its computer, all these things are the Source manifesting itself as each of these individual things and persons, as well as all the other things, persons, events, happenings, imaginings, stories, songs, and situations which comprise the real, existing universe.

The Source, in reality, molds and contorts itself into every one of the components of the actual universe. And each thing is itself and grows increasingly into its aged self as the Source forms itself in continuing and always-changing duration into that thing.

From the Source springs all things because all things are the Source; all things exist because the Source exists, and from it comes the existence of all things.

It is as though the Source hums a tune, and we come into being in that melody to dance to it, until it stops for us.

Perhaps there is more—perhaps the passage into after-dying progresses toward a destination. Perhaps I/we will slide out of our old, heavy skins of mortal self-concern into an after-dying recognition—a display!—that after all, we have always been individual manifestations of the same Source and thus, we are and always have been forever bound to one another in our very existence. We are all made of the same stuff, for essentially we are—each of us, each existing thing (from rocks, to random fall of snowflakes, to rock-‘n-roll songs, to riverside fishing spots, to rubbing noses in play, to roaring cataracts, to revenge murders, to red Corvettes, to low, rolling hill-country, to romance, to wheelchair reveries)—we are all the boundlessly new and unique formations which the Source of Existence makes of itself as What Is changes constantly.

This is not some exotic, remote, wholly intellectual construct I am speaking of. We need no mathematics or arcane theory to understand that everything is the Source simply being itself in its manifold forms of being, each form engaged in simply doing what it does. Everything simply does what it is. Rivers hurry downstream. Birds argue over berries. Salmon and Monarch butterflies travel thousands of miles each year, against all odds of survival, swimming upstream or flying north, to return to that one sweet place on the whole planet Earth where one’s mate is to be found and where

the next generations of fragile winged creatures and tough, scaly critters are to be born into existence.

Why does the Source do all this? If there is a knowable answer to this question, I do not know it. My guess is that the Source does all this—if any reason is needed—because it is fun. My guess is that the Source becomes the universe, growing, changing, shifting, because it can!—because the universe is potentially there, ready to be realized in rock and soil and air and fur, and the Source is able—metaphorically—to open the floodgates and release all that potential into actuality.

In other words, the answer to the question Why? is Why Not?

This way of understanding is no mystery. It is a simple experience. It is a simple recognition and acknowledgement that everything is as it is, and that that is acceptable and welcome.

We exist, my friend! What existing thing could ever have imagined becoming what it is before it came into being? That is impossible. Nonetheless, we exist! We do not *have to* be or to endure in changing existence. It just happens that you and I—and not other possible versions of writer and reader—but rather, the actual you and I, against all odds, *are*

here now, in this moment, doing what we cannot help but do because what we do arises exactly from who we are.

We should rejoice in our existence!—though there is no need for self-celebration since we have done nothing to achieve our own existence except to have received, unasked for, this gift of finding ourselves present to every other creature in existence.

We—you and I—exist in that we have found ourselves here among so many other things, including things of great beauty, exotic or colorful or engrossing or compellingly attractive things, things that amaze or cause wonder or stimulate curiosity or art or laughter, as well as things that from our planet-bound viewpoint, threaten our existence (amoebas, bacteria, viruses, fungi, pollution, poisonous or constricting snakes, poisonous insects and frogs and lizards and weathered desert creatures, and most especially, other human beings.)

To realize the quiet, inviting marvel of existence is a beautiful revelation. It occurs the first time one forgets to continue that interior dialogue with oneself that goes on endlessly, and enters the silence of simply being oneself, of being present in this world of color and sound and fresh wind blowing. In that sacred silence (sacred because it reveals the

reality in which we live and participate), it is as though we pass through a film of separation to find a world opened to our senses in which everything simply, silently exists, and in its existence simply stands or lies or swims or flies into and out of our perception, all the while enduring in its continually unfolding *being here*, proclaiming its existence: “*I am...I am...I am....*”

Who could not love such a simple entity—a grasshopper or a child or a motorized lawn mower—singing the song of itself: *I am...I am...I am....*

This paper-clip, this stapler, these papers lying on my desk before me—all these in some essential way are my friends and neighbors, my brothers and sisters, just as are all the other things in existence, whether I appreciate them or not. In the silence, they all appear as their pure selves, doing what they are, being what they are, becoming what they are.

That’s the story I hold, if anyone cares to know.

And that’s the second point. The first of course is that from the Source, each of us proceeds and does what we are and is joined to one another in this universe of existence. That is the first and most beautiful of human experiences.

The second point is similar. None of it makes any difference. Life/existence/being here/experiencing/the Silence/reality—whatever you might wish to call it—is enthrallingly beautiful—even the ugly parts. The deformed are as beautiful as the perfectly formed. Dying, observed from the world of existing, is as beautiful as sunset. And all this beauty with which we are surrounded, as painful as it often is, comes and goes in an instant, like clouds forever changing and transforming. One beauty changes into another. Thus, the first beauty transforms into and is absorbed into the second.

Tuesday evening, you and I sit beside one another watching—being taken up by—the slowly every-changing sunset. We remark on its splendor. Others leave and return home shortly after the sun lingers and then drops beneath the horizon. You and I remain and witness the continuing darkening of the colors in the clouds.

When darkness covers all, we rise and go our ways. For us, the darkness may seem to be the terminal point of the preceding day. And we may expect that when light comes again to the sky, Wednesday will have begun.

But that is not the way it actually is. If we had continued to sit and watch, say, the place on the horizon where the sun dipped into the ocean, we would experience all existing things continue to morph into their changing selves at this current moment, despite the sky-color remaining dark. We would watch the moon, whose shape changes continually from nothing to crescent to quarter to gibbous to circular, and then back again through these shapes to nothing. We would watch Orion probe, one star at a time, into the sky in the east, and then fully formed, cross majestically the darkened sky, and descend finally into the western sea.

And then, if we had the stamina to continue watching, the east would begin to glow faintly in the darkness, and grow brighter, until the hot-orange globe of the sun enters ceremoniously the eastern sky, to march splendidly across the sky, until at the time of diminishment and failing light, the people again gather on the shore, and we watch again the gorgeous sunset—this Wednesday version so utterly different from the Tuesday version we had witnessed just hours before, that we cannot help but wonder aloud how Nature could so casually abandon the perfect finesse of last evening's sunset—tossing such gorgeous beauty away without regret—and to replace it, unrecalled, with the completely different but perfectly finessed composition of water and cloud and light before us.

All that *was* in the prior moment becomes the new All that exists in the *present* moment. Change sheds skin after skin, each skin as intricately and harmoniously formed and colored as the preceding skin.

All that beauty come and gone! And where does it go? It no longer exists as it was. It has become something else. Pfft!

Reality continually flowers. It is not the case that the present reality comes to be and then instantly dies away, to be replaced by the next present reality. In truth, reality simply continues its slow transformation; it becomes something other without dying to its old self. Beauty passes—but its passing in itself becomes the ensuing beauty. We also pass.

Reality is so profligate that the current beauty is always able to be observed and loved by the open eye, but like sunsets which change continually from one moment into the next without pause, each moment of beauty glistens in its clear self, but none ever stays, remaining outrageously breath-taking, despite the throb of nagging change.

The current beauty transforms into the next current beauty with neither command nor hiatus. Yet in our memories, the current beauty is thrown haphazardly to the side as the next present beauty arises. What

does this mean? That all beauty, all reality, is expendable. Nothing is permanent and permanently valuable. Everything slides away into something else, and as itself, disappears. And so, in the long view, nothing in this process matters. None of it has any lasting worth. All of it bursts into brilliant reality in a present moment, and fades away in the next moment, like the bright yellow skin of a banana, bespeckled with small black spots, thrown inelegantly into the brown garbage.

If even the best that reality has to offer lasts so briefly and is so replaceable, what then are we? Are we not also in our brief moment of existence, disposable? Of course, we are. We are like Independence Day sparklers to whatever death is. We burn with attractiveness, allure, beauty, and passion. And too soon, our display is over and we become a burnt out husk.

We blossom, we love, sometimes we come to know ourselves as we truly are, and then we die. We are, at the very least, gone from the earth, impalpable, unheard, inexpressive, and then, forgotten.

The Jews, God bless them, try to pass on to their children the memories of those who went before them. They call themselves, even to the generation of Abraham in perhaps the 14th century BCE, 3400 years ago—

they call themselves “we” in relation to all their Jewish predecessors, and especially to those family members and notables in the community whose stories still circulate and whose memories are still vibrant.

And all this remembering, and all this *we*-ing stem from a single realization: when we die, we evaporate. There is nothing left of us but (1) a corpse, and (2) the memories which others have of us. The corpse is worthless, and it corrupts soon enough, so that eventually there are just fragments of bones. So, the legacies of Jews to one another are the memories—fond and delicious memories are most valued—which they have left behind them.

This Jewish custom, in my estimation, is a noble and humane way to bestow upon the best people in the community a kind of immortality, at least for a few generations, before even the best of grandpas and of grandmas, of scholars and of witty fools, slip into oblivion.

And from another perspective, of course, this custom is drenched in human sadness, that the best never remain. Death is always loss—another precious life has gone from us—a life which we may have loved and needed and enjoyed. It doesn't matter—even a life that was detestable:

nonetheless, from a humane viewpoint, it was a human life, so precious in the having of life, so still and helpless the corpse in the loss of it.

Usually, we affluent humans don't like to ponder these vivid realities of death. We prefer to see ourselves in the freshness and brazenness of youth, living in the moment, accumulating for ourselves whatever life has to offer. And so we have believed, perhaps from as far back as the time of discovering our cleverness in the caves of Neanderthal Europe, that we are the masters of all we survey. As we have continued over millennia to "civilize," that is, to become ever more technologically sophisticated, our natural weaknesses in strength, agility, power, ability, guile, and so on, as regards our enemies/prey and ourselves have radically shifted—because of our technological cleverness—from us to them. And this gap between the "natural" and the "artificial" (meaning, "made by human inventiveness") has grown wider and wider, so that now, we consider the Earth not to be the nest in which we live, but rather, to be the domain we own and the source of the materials we need to build and extend our "civilized" way of life.

What I mean to say is this. We have so fallen in love, Narcissus-like, with our image of ourselves that we have branded it into every aspect of the

natural world. Our planet carries the increasing burden of our affluent garbage: the sea birds and marine animals choke on the plastic detritus which we dump into the oceans as though they were bottomless. The land is saturated with the chemicals we spray on it to produce the poisoned crops that we eat. The air is laden with the giga-tons of carbon-gas emissions which the factories and industries, and the planes, trains, and automobiles, and even the natural methane-producing digestive processes generate. These lethal pollutants choke us with COPD and lung cancer and oh, so much more. Even interplanetary space is crapped up with our communications hardware and our military junk. And the moon bears human footprints, and various symbols and flags, and broken-down machinery—evidence of the penetration of that orb’s beauty by the careless and heavy-handed enterprises of human beings.

We have made the natural world into the image and likeness of us! But we don’t know what we’re doing—either now or ever. We are and always have been short-sighted deities. Each of us has a “deity bubble”—our vanity, our self-importance, our ego—which extends out from us for a certain distance. Whatever is within the boundaries of that deity bubble is important to us because we judge our worth by how the other people within the extent of our deity-bubble respond to us. That is, our social importance

is judged by the reach of our power to get people to do what we want them to do. Often this takes the form of getting people to give us their money.

In any event, our deity-bubble extends to the farthest circle of people over whom we exert influence. Beyond that band of people lives that large group of people who do not know or care who you or I are, nor do they even know our names. Since that group is beyond the limits of our deity-bubble, we ignore them. We don't often confront the actuality that we mean nothing to them. Rather, in order to save face among our associates, as well as to avoid the impact on us of the truth that we are unimportant to almost everyone in the world, we say that they are unimportant to us.

And so, blindly and short-sightedly, we carry out our plans and accumulate our wealth. In doing this, we never think nor imagine what the later consequences of what we are doing now are. For example, a farmer deforests the land and plants crops, and calls that land "agricultural." And on the land so designated, he plants a single crop—say, barley—every year. Over time, he grows frustrated with the land because the barley crop each year is smaller and smaller, and the grains themselves are smaller and weaker. He did not understand that the single crop takes the nutrients it needs from the soil, which grows less and less "rich" in those nutrients.

When many or all the farmers face this same problem, a scientist sees an opportunity in solving it. Perhaps, the scientist solves the problem for the benefit of the farmers or for the good of humanity. Or perhaps the scientist simply sees the opportunity to make money. In either case, the scientist invents artificial fertilizers (*artificial* here meaning, again, “made by human inventiveness”), sells them to the farmers, and makes lots of money. Technology has conquered ignorance and inconvenience again!

Those poor farmers! And poor us! The scientist invents artificial fertilizers, then establishes his own chemical company to make these products, and then branches out to weed-killers and then to pesticides. The scientist makes lots more money, and likes it. The farmers’ harvests increase in size and quality, so they like this “progress.” The supermarkets proudly display the abundance of our technologically improved agricultural lands. The people buy as if compulsively, as though to take part in the glories of our technological way of life. Everyone is happy and thrives for a while.

But in other desks in the government bureaucracy, observers notice that in the general population the cancer rate is rising. And other scientists are trying to deal with huge algae blooms in the rivers and coastal waters of

the Southeastern and West Coast states. These algae blooms are killing fish, especially the smaller fish lower on the food chain.

The light comes on in the scientific community: all the chemicals which the farmers have been spraying on their agricultural lands for the past half-century have polluted the food supply over time. Human resistance to these poisons had been stalwart for many years, but now the people, poisoned by their own food, are afflicted with diseases caused by the chemicals. And the algae blooms flourish in the warm southern waters, fed by the artificial fertilizers which run off the agricultural lands during the spring rains.

Most people ignore these findings and continue to eat the food. The chemical company certainly is not going to tell the people that their food is poisoned! So the days go on as though nothing threatening is happening.

Some people become aware of these problems. They are inclined to protect themselves, and various food movements crop up: the organic food movement (a fleecing, because the word “organic” has no commonly accepted meaning), veganism, natural foods, whole foods, unprocessed foods, macrobiotics, and so on.

The ordinary, poisoned people think these “food nuts” are a little wacked, but live and let live, they say. But they think the “food nuts” are paying too much for their food. – A lot of people have these attitudes even while they’re suffering from the cancers that the poisoned food has grown in them.

People with open eyes begin to see that the problems which are arising are all caused by human attempts to re-direct the forces of nature. These forces relentlessly press themselves on the intruding humans. And ultimately, they always win the battle.

In our example, the poisoning of the environment did not begin when the farmers began to use artificial fertilizers. The problem was initiated by ignorant human beings like the farmers who deforested the land in the first place, in order to expose the soil of the agricultural lands. As soon as the farmers began cutting down the trees, nature—which, let’s say, “liked” the forest where it was (otherwise, it wouldn’t have grown a forest there in the first place)—began to take the first steps in the long process of re-establishing the forest. Various native plants began to grow among the barley plants. As the farmer fertilized the barley plants, the native plants were also fertilized, and they prospered as well.

Of course, the farmer couldn't monetize the "weed" plants, so he tried to kill them off with weed killers...and so on. The result is that the farmers had to use stronger, more poisonous chemicals to try to stop the forest's re-invasion of the agricultural lands by sending in the first wave of reforestation plants—that is, those plants which the farmers call "weeds."

The farmers are not fighting off "invasive species" when they spray the weed killers. They are fighting the planet's attempt at reforestation. Take a guess which side of this fight is going to win. (Hint: Remember the Dust Bowl of the 1930s.)

Those cultures and tribes which live closest to the land, and least intrusively, seem to me to be the groups which will sustain themselves for the longest time. Those who co-operate with nature, while more vulnerable to nature's unpredictability, are the more adaptable to its ways.

Those, on the other hand, who defend themselves from the ways of nature and insist on having it their own way, though safer and more productive in the short run, are more vulnerable to betrayal by their technology and the unforeseen consequences of minor decisions, which only show themselves when the opportunity for side-stepping these consequences has already passed. Consider, for example, the Technological

problems with the Boeing Max 8 airplane. The millions spent in its development have been lost because of what turned out to be improper “cost saving” technological decisions.

Our technology always fails us. But we are so enamored of its glitz that we overlook the clues or the common sense evaluations which would save us from the disasters which it inevitably brings.

So when we re-focus on our theme of dying and death, we must bring these ideas about technology to the consideration of the looming catastrophe which has been known and ignored for decades, and which, as the deadlines for action are passing, is only now beginning to enter the public dialog—the Climate Crisis.

First, we must distinguish *science* from *technology*: science learns; technology applies that learning to getting things done, making money in the process. For example, in the early 20th century, Albert Einstein discovered that matter and energy are the same thing in two different forms. This discovery is captured in his famous equation, $e = mc^2$ (where e means *energy* and m means *mass*, which is a measure of the amount of matter which is present. The expression c^2 represents a very large number.

So the equation says that a small amount of matter is equivalent to a very large amount of energy.)

That is what Einstein's learning and thinking produced—pure scientific theory, or, if you wish, knowledge. Floating right on the surface of this knowledge is the technological conclusion that if matter and energy are the same thing in different forms, then it is theoretically possible to create a situation in which matter changes its form, to become pure energy.

The outcome of this technological hypothesis was demonstrated to the world in August, 1945, during World War II, when the United States devastated two Japanese cities, Hiroshima and, three days later, Nagasaki, using two newly developed atomic bombs. These two bombs converted a few pounds of the element, Uranium 238, into its equivalent energy. This energy was so powerful that it immediately flattened the two cities and took a quarter million innocent, civilian lives, as well as an unknown number of lives in the years and decades that followed.

Now, the situation in our polarized nation is this. If you are one who accepts, and perhaps even trusts, the observations and conclusions drawn by scientists, then you have perhaps learned that the gaseous by-products of burning fossil fuels (oil, gasoline, and coal) have entered earth's

atmosphere in such substantial amounts that a “film” of these gasses has formed above the earth. This film partially blocks the exit of the sun’s light and heat from the atmosphere. This causes earth’s atmosphere to “trap” the sun’s energy under this “film,” rather than to allow this energy to escape into interplanetary space.

And so, in the eras when the sun’s light and heat could pass through earth’s atmosphere unobstructed, the earth was a cool, temperate planet. But when this gaseous “film” began to prevent the sun’s light and heat from escaping into space, the heat and light trapped below the “film” reflected back onto the earth and has been causing a long-term rise in the average temperature of earth’s atmosphere.

The complex organism which is the planet Earth is very sensitive to stressors which alter over time its yearly routine. And so, this rise in average temperature is causing profound changes in the conditions which support life on this planet. The increasing average temperatures are melting the north and south polar ice caps, raising the sea level and flooding low-lying portions of coastal cities world-wide. The sea is thus encroaching on inhabited territory, driving people upland from their homes and disrupting the functioning of the urban sewer systems. Our coastal

cities are being flooded, and they will continue to be, until much of each city will be permanently under water. And New York City, for example, will cease to function long before Manhattan is completely submerged because so many of the vital systems (water, electricity, steam, transportation, and so on) are beneath the sidewalk and will be flooded and become inoperative even before the sea fills the streets.

In addition, the rising average temperatures will have severe effects on the land masses. Rising temperatures will cause more water to evaporate from the earth's surface, creating arid land where there were once agricultural fields, and in the end, turning those arid lands into deserts.

Moreover, the crops which are grown in the various climate regions in the temperate zones are not habituated to the higher temperatures which will prevail as the atmosphere warms. Increasingly, harvests will fall short or fail entirely as the plants wither under the hotter sun.

In addition, recent studies have found that field workers in Honduras and Guatemala are unable to work as hard or as long as they are accustomed to work. Workers who are in the habit of working 10 hours in 100 degree fields are able to work only 7 hours in 110 degree fields. Their

bodies simply cannot endure the increased temperature. – In these findings, perhaps there is a forecast of how the increased heat will affect all humans.

The increase in atmospheric temperature will also dry out the forests and scrub-lands, supplying the tinder for greater and more ferocious wildfires than in the past. Likewise, the average sea-water temperatures in the mid-Atlantic, Caribbean, and mid-Pacific will rise, promoting the occurrence of more frequent and more devastating storm events.

This is the future of humans on this planet, according to the weather scientists. But we should not expect that humanity will come together to pull us all collectively away from this impending danger. The chances of this happening get slimmer by the day—for, there are not so many days left until we have passed the point of no return, as far as the pollution of the atmosphere is concerned. At that point, we will have no way to reduce the amount of CO₂ in the air to healthy levels. We will begin to take in less oxygen with each breath until the time comes when whole cities will suffocate from oxygen deprivation and die within a short time.

Those, such as I, who are inclined to believe the predictions which are based in research and legitimate science, now find ourselves opposed by a

Know-Nothing faction who deny that catastrophe is impending and who say that such predictions are based on “fake news” from the “fake scientists” who make them. These Know-Nothings are led by Donald Trump, the US president, who is attempting at this moment to subvert not only American democracy (an issue for another essay) but the knowledge-foundations on which all peaceful and trustworthy societies are built.

Trump has created his own climate science—which directly opposes the premises and the conclusions of legitimate mainstream climate science research. Journalists have revealed that Trump began his “new climate science” by paying willing scientists to write articles and notes in climate-science journals and scholarly books, challenging the self-consistent and repeated conclusions of mainstream researchers. This anti-science has continued for several years, so that the Know-Nothings can now claim that “scientists” deny the legitimacy of the predictions of catastrophe.

This creation of a whole “anti-science” demonstrates to me how far Trump will go to deny that he is wrong on an issue, and to call his followers home to the henhouse, no matter how outrageous the untruth of the issue is. As a result, the nation is polarized on the fundamental issue of what the facts are in the climate-crisis debate. This split in the electorate means that

nothing will be resolved, and no action will be taken. Meanwhile, Trump is still selling the nation his anti-science in order to stimulate the coal and petroleum industries, who, though they are big-money donors to Trump's campaign for a second term as president, are the actual *causes* of the climate crisis.

[Witness also Trump's current campaign to "anti-scientize" the scientific community's findings on the novel coronavirus and the Covid-19 disease which is causing the current pandemic. Trump's aim here seems to be to undercut the scientific conclusions and the consequent recommendations to the public to preserve public health in favor of the economic "re-opening" of those areas of the country subject to the "stay at home" orders issued by the various governors, which have dealt a severe economic blow to the United States.]

To return to our topic, the obvious technological solution to the continued threat of climate change is to remove the carbon dioxide gas in the planet's atmosphere and to prevent its replacement by additional CO₂ emissions in the future.

Removing the current burden of CO₂ from the atmosphere is a technological problem. And the technologists have risen to the occasion

and begun to develop ways of capturing air-borne CO₂ and literally burying it in the earth. (I can not imagine the unforeseen consequences in a few decades or centuries of having giga-tons of CO₂ gas percolating through the soil. Will they never learn that technology is not a human invention? It is an enemy's curse on humanity. And the enemy is like the Joker, who always has an unforeseen angle to play from. – However, I do not think that we will have the time to worry about these things. We will be gone before then.)

But building skyward-reaching towers, Babel-like, to suck the CO₂ out of the air will be a feat less difficult than stopping the polluters from continuing to pour the stuff into the atmosphere. It is these people who are now responsible for the future untimely deaths of your children and grandchildren, and indeed of all humanity.

It is not difficult to understand why the polluters will continue to pollute. When the Industrial Revolution began in England at the end of the 18th century, the industries which led the revolution were small—grain milling, cloth dying, fur processing, lumber production and wood products, import and export, and so on. The reason that these industries were small is because England is small. It is a relatively small island, of which the

habitable parts are divided into very small, fenced pastures and plots and gardens. We Americans know nothing of this close kind of living. Even the New England towns, so compact and British, are surrounded by large open expanses of land.

When America began to undertake large-scale industry, the entrepreneurs had room for their businesses to expand and to grow; room to begin new cities at the new railroad junctions; room to grow boom towns during the several gold rushes; room to reach new markets, such as Russia and China. In America, there was room for anything and everything. And so, the American promise was interpreted as being fulfilled when a person with little more than determination could begin a new life in a new place, and grow into a wealthy, well-respected member of his or her community.

The transportation of the time reflected and indeed, brought about this sense of endless possibility in the American vision. Technological advancements in harnessing power from water, steam, and later, petroleum products, opened a continent to those willing to risk building an entirely new life in a strange place. And thus, the Euro-American version of civilization, which did not include respect for human life, recognition of the universal community of humankind nor the commonalities of peoples of

various skin tones and ways of life, spread across the North American wilderness, which happened to have been populated for centuries by non-Europeans who lived close to the land and expressed their culture in non-European ways.

Toward these indigenous peoples, and indeed, toward all people of color, including most worthy of note, the African slaves transported and sold to white plantationers, the Euro-Americans felt a fierce and unrelenting attitude of superiority, due to three factors: technological superiority (they were able to conquer and kill more people of color than the latter were the former); belief in the superiority of their Christian religious faith over any other variety of worship of any other deities than God the Father and Jesus Christ his son (who was understood to be neither Jewish nor more darkly complected, but rather, Christian and white, just like his Gentile followers were); and finally, education and refinement, which became available as consequences of the success and wealth of the American White Male Establishment.

One aspect of the culture which these white men founded in North America was its need for transportation of people, goods, and information over long distances. These needs were quite quickly filled by the invention

of the steam locomotive and thus of long-distance railroads, of steam-powered riverboats and of lake- and ocean-going freighters, and finally, of the telegraph. These innovations permitted the American brand of culture to spread throughout the continent. It also allowed continuous contact to be maintained between the “civil” urban business and military establishments, and the most distant outposts of the new, “free,” and prosperous American way of life—as well as providing the re-supply routes, the transport of military personnel and equipment, and the transport of raw materials to the eastern urban factories and of the goods they produced to their intended markets.

The freedom of movement which this American attitude engendered—symbolized by the “cowboy” icon, a lone horse and an armed rider unrestricted and pursuing the rider’s personal whims—has for a century and a half been a fundament of the American worldview. Our society now is founded on the principle of freedom of personal movement because we have designed our cities and our way of life on this principle. Whereas our founding fathers were accustomed to live in the towns and villages in which they were raised, we now find it perfectly acceptable for our children and their families to live in places, usually cities, which are

some distance from the cities in which they were raised. Indeed, even their parents retire and move to other places.

Such families, though they live in places far separated from their parents and siblings, can remain in contact with their family members because of the current technology—telephones, cell phones, laptop computers, tablets, as well as airplanes, which can deliver a person virtually anywhere in the world in a day or less, and for shorter distances, automobiles driven on limited access roads. – Indeed, some successful or striving people work in one city and live their daily lives—other than work—in a different city, flying back and forth between the two cities.

The point here is that the cowboy icon remains with our social vision in a morphed way. The cowboy is still armed—currently, in an outrageous way, which threatens the lives of the people around him—but has traded in his horse and saddle for an automobile or a pickup truck, which is marvelously faster than his horse, and far more comfortable than his saddle. Nonetheless, the miles between where the cowboy is located and where he wishes to be are still there, separating him from his haven and calling him to conquer them.

With distance and travel at the heart of our current culture—and because our entire transportation-loving culture rides in vehicles which use petroleum products for fuel—how is it possible to diminish significantly our CO₂ output from fossil-fuel-powered transportation vehicles? Automobiles and long-haul trucks are not luxuries in our society—though those who have too much money (measured against the many millions who faultlessly are destitute) often spend lots of money to buy premium automobiles. At any rate, automobiles, airplanes, and trucks are *necessary* in order for those who live comfortably in our society to negotiate their way in it. Business-people must travel; young parents must get their pre-school children over to grandma's on their way to work; and so on. The fact is that virtually every store we shop at, every church we attend, every friend or relative we might want to visit cannot be gotten to without a private transportation vehicle.

So, is it realistic to plan to eliminate atmospheric pollution by eliminating the automobile as the source of much of this pollution?

Are you willing to give up your car for the sake of reducing carbon emissions? If you are not, why should anyone else be expected to do the same?

And if it should come to pass that cars are no longer available to the public, who are now forced to ride buses to work, can we really expect a young working mother to set out for work with junior in one arm, her laptop and briefcase in the other, and both shoulders draped with baby-necessities bags, to walk through the winter rain or snow (falling at the new usual rate of 6 inches an hour) so that she can get to the bus stop by 5:30 a.m., to sit in a bus fighting snow as well as morning traffic, to jump off the bus, to walk the four blocks to grandma's low-carbon-footprint apartment where she can expect to use the stairs rather than the always packed elevator, to drop the baby off, to slog through the snow several blocks to a different bus stop, to catch a bus which will take her to the city center, within two blocks' walk of her office building—and then, to be presentably dressed, organized, and ready to be a productive worker for the next 8 or 9 hours?

This kind of suburban-to-city lifestyle is, of course, just not feasible without private automobiles. The preparation which is demanded by the take-the-bus option just to *get* to work is a job in itself. And as a result, Mom can expect regularly to put in 19-hour days from the time she steps out the door to the time she drags herself into the house in the evening.

What are the functional alternatives? We don't live in the little Netherlands, where we might joyfully bike to work. And can you image Donald Trump or other oligarchs biking to work in their \$2,000 suits? And how would the Vice-President of the United States travel the 2.5 miles down Massachusetts Avenue in Washington D.C. from his or her home at the Naval Observatory to his or her job in the White House?

Currently Mr. Pence does so by motorcade, with much siren-noise and motorcycle blatting. Imagine now that automobiles are forbidden for the sake of breathing. In that case, the Vice President would travel there in her bicycle-cade, where she peddles her bike in a circle-the-wagons protective heap of Secret Service personnel, each peddling alongside, furtively watching the windows and roofs of the passing buildings for snipers? Or maybe the technologists could make a two-seated bicycle—perhaps something like a rickshaw, with a brawny Secret Service guy huffing away on the first seat, grinding the rig up Capitol Hill—so that the powerful one could sit in privacy, protected from the elements if not the IEDs, and take off her pant-leg clips.

Those who are urging us to be hopeful about the impending devastation are overlooking two crucial American qualities, which in one

way or another we all share. First, Americans are greedy and competitive. Need proof of that? Just recall your drive into work this morning. The fact is that we would step on each other's faces to scabble up to a place 12 inches higher than the place we had before. – Remember those old Black Friday midnights, when people would circle the block waiting for the Walmart to open at 4 a.m., so they could get “unbelievable bargains”? Those folks were so greedy and competitive that several times, living, ordinary people *lost their lives* as the throng crushed forward to squeeze into the Walmart doorway.

These crushers-at-the-door are the folks that you hope will cooperate with each other so selflessly that together the human community, recognizing one another as their brothers and sisters, will join together in solidarity to administer artificial respiration to the planet until its heart begins beating again on its own? Good grief!

And the second disaster-inviting American quality? Dissociation from the common problem to indulge our individual lives. Is there a migration problem on our southern border? We don't involve ourselves deeply enough even to find out what the problems of the refugees are. We see them simply as inconvenient distractions from what we'd rather be

doing, such as watching CSI. “Send the army in!” – Have they got a flooding problem in Miami, where slowly the ocean-level is rising? The Corps of Engineers will figure it out. “Send in the Corps!” – Having wildfire problems out in California? Gee, we feel bad for you for the four minutes of films of your homes burning down on the TV news. Then, having gotten that emotion of concern out of us (“Those poor folks, what a shame! Thank God it wasn’t us!”), we don’t want to be interrupted by any of that stuff again, while we watch *Miami Vice*.

As always, we have the wealth and the luxury to hire someone else to solve our problems for us—and to do the heavy-lifting for us. And so, while we’ve got our faces planted in our various screens, spending our spiritual lives playing our fantasy games, and imagining that the real world is just like these games, the silent, hovering devastation approaches us. In our ignorance, we do not even recognize it.

Then the call goes out: Save the planet. Give up your cars.

And we shout back, “Hell, no. I paid \$53,000 for that pickup.”

This is how it will happen. Some will die in their sleep. Some will suddenly realize that their dying is underway, and panic. Some who are not

yet dying will see the opportunity to scavenge through the houses of the affluent dead, hoarding for themselves the riches that were hoarded there. Some will kill themselves when they are faced with dying an environmental dying.

Most of us—the poor, the old and infirm, the young and innocent—your grandchildren and mine—and I myself will simply one day begin to choke and in that way enter the dying of suffocation.

Pfft.

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(Note: The title of this essay recalls Margaret Atwood's short story, "When It Happens," in Dancing Girls, 1979. Well worth the read.)

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