

past — PRESENT — future

We here are often—I want to write ‘always’—amazed at how *off* the weather forecasts are. The local newspaper is the vaguest. The internet web sites (there are several) for my zip code is less off, perhaps my zip code is many square miles of sparsely populated “country”, from the ocean to maybe 1000 feet up. But even the weather forecast of one of the web sites that claims to have measurements less than a mile from here, is nowhere near reliable. We blame it on the twenty-eight micro-climates the tourist bureau says this island has. From alpine to tropical to desert to beach climates. Depending where you are on this island, on the beach, or at 1400 feet altitude, or on the windward side (rainy with black sand beaches) or on the leeward side (hot with white sane beaches) and many other distinctions. My observation is that our weather is even more local than that. Two months ago both mountains had a large top of snow. It rained almost non-stop, and it was cold for here: during the day, it never got up to 70°F In colder climates people set their thermostat around those numbers (between 19° and 21°C). The weather people obviously do not know much about tomorrow. All they know is today and “trends.”

Scientists tell us that global warming is here, now causing climate change, and it is mostly our fault. I can accept that because I have known for most of my life that the way we are living on this planet is all wrong. For a hundred thousand years—longer or shorter, but around that number—we, humans, knew how to survive. We lived on what was around us, and we always must have known not to destroy what we now call nature because we were living on and in all that is. Until, say, ten thousand years ago, when we got grandiose ideas about who we were. We imagined we could do better than nature. An evolution not physical but in our minds; an evolution sideways—definitely not up..

We did all the right things for a long time. On the time scale of how long we have existed among all the other life forms of this planet, it was yesterday when we suddenly changed. Now, we destroy, we poison the air, seriously pollute and misuse the waters of this planet, destroy the soil. Thinking that it is we who run this planet, our automatic first response is, *Gee, we’ll think of something one of these days, we’ll seriously start solving this problem tomorrow or the day after.*

We may indeed have done it, but does that means we have to fix something that is a planetary process? Year after year burning more coal and oil to make electricity to power our wasteful life style, digging wherever we thought there might be oil and so destroying enormous parts of the natural world. We pumped tons and tons of poisonous stuff into the atmosphere, into the ocean, into practically every creek and river. It is a law of nature that a little push here can and sometimes does cause a huge landslide. Even if we stopped today the process that our day by day “caused” will go on for at least 30 years scientists tell us.

Let’s look at the very old days when we lived sustainably. But that is an unthinkable thought, because we are conditioned to think that the only way is straight ahead, always better, always up, always more.

Our banner is MORE. More people, double the number half a century ago, and half of all of us now live in cities. Food is not grown by people but by machines. It is processed by other machines . Packaged in airtight plastic to be shipped halfway around the world. The half of us that does not live in cities, live close to and depend on those cities. There are very few people left who actually live on dirt, and get their water from a tiny stream nearby, and their food from what grows around them. We may have lived on this earth in that way for a thousand years and we were civil. Then we changed the biosphere of this planet so thoroughly that the atmosphere we all must breathe makes us sick and the stream that made life possible not that long ago probably has dried up.

By now I have lost most of you. But, you protest, surely we cannot go back to primitive?

Do we have a choice?

And then you would say, Well, yes, we have Science. Surely some scientists can find a way to get back to the good old days without us having to give up all the things we no longer can do without.

I ask, What are those things you cannot do without.

You would list a hundred things; and freedom and democracy and religion and a car, and

manufactured food, and a cell phone (mobile phone called everywhere else) and many more things we cannot do without.

The whole house of cards we so recklessly, and ruthlessly, erected is falling down, evaporating into the thin air it was made from.

And you say, that is not even believable.

Sometimes when a really major change is about to happen, like a storm, a flood, an earthquake, it begins with a hint. You faintly hear some thunder far away. The sky is getting overcast, there's a chill in the air, it is getting kind of dark for three in the afternoon. The animals act strange, the birds stop singing. Watch out, because then the storm drops upon you; the earthquake rattles your dishes and books fall out of the book case.

That's where we are today. The glaciers are melting. We send expeditions out, very fantastic instruments are invented to measure the thickness of the ice over the north pole. Hmm, yes, it seems the ice is thinner than a few days, weeks, years ago. In a few years ships can actually sail over the North Pole from Europe to Asia. Countries are already fighting over who owns what piece of ocean where ice used to be; there may be oil under there! More and more people seem to develop skin cancers. The world ocean is getting more acidic, which destroys coral, and coral reefs in turn protect land, particularly low islands. In addition we have so over-fished the ocean that—unbelievable as it seems—the ocean is dying. Scientists computed that the still increasing tons of carbon dioxide comes from the billion cars we drive, the million airplanes that we cannot be without, but most of all from the installations that burn oil and coal to make the electricity we need to run our world.

We could go green, you say. Let's have the sun make our electricity, or the wind, or the waves of the ocean. See how smart we are? People are hard at work to design and build electric cars, electric everything. It'll be a few years before we have switched over to an electric world, like, twenty, or fifty years, say, the end of the century. But we will win in the end we all think.

As scientists like to say, *other things being equal* (be assured, they never are) then there will be 9, or 11 billion people, and only a very much reduced number of other beings that we allow to exist. And inevitably all there is for those billions of people to eat and drink is green electricity, because other than green electricity there will be very little green growing.

I can't see further than this afternoon. Hope the rain will have stopped.

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After half a century of meditation, am now mostly in the now, I feel and understand that there is only Now. Yesterday is history. What we call memory is pictures, snapshots, sound bites, mini movies. If we tell bits of our history—even yesterday's—it is our edited version of what was.

The future is totally unknown of course. We cannot even see ahead one hour, one minute. We live as if we know what we are going to do tomorrow or next week. We have calendars, clocks, books to write down appointments. But, when suddenly something happens—you get sick, the power goes out—the future you thought you knew is replaced by an entirely different one that you had no way to foresee.

All we can see and study is trends. Our whole civilization is now focused on polls for everything. Polls are supposed to measure the Now, and “trends” but they are amazingly non-predictive. I spent many years of my academic life playing with statistics. What I learned is that statistics can be, sometimes, an approximation of possible futures. To be read with a mouthful of salt.

It is much more fun to accept that the future is totally veiled in mystery, miracle, and maybe.

robert wolff, april '09, july '11, august '12