

mid-summer meditations

Does anyone remember y2k (year 2000)? The "millennium bug," which, we were told, threatened to interrupt vital services all over the world. In the early days of computers memory and storage (hard disks) were expensive and limited, so it was important to save as much code as possible. The year was often reduced to only two numerals. That meant that when 1999 finished 2000 would appear as 1900, which would make many operations impossible. It seemed a tiny glitch, but it was important enough for people and countries to spend a great deal of money to buy new computers or buy the "firmware" that fixed the problem. I was quite involved in the preparation for possible consequences on a committee that was formed in the village of Volcano where I lived at the time. I remember that when 2000 rolled around "nothing happened." Perhaps mention was made of some minor difficulties here and there, that were easy to fix. But for me, y2k became one of those events that flits by in the rush of history that left me convinced only partially. Had the experts been so wrong? How could I have been taken in by what seemed to me very logical, understandable problems?

There are a few other explanations that, for one reason or another, I find not really convincing.

One is the 2000 election. It got held up for weeks, counted and recounted, and then suddenly ended by the Supreme Court forbidding a recount. I seem to be alone in thinking it more a coup than an election — in a country that preaches all over the world the importance of elections if you want to be a democracy.

And 9/11. The way those three (not only the two that were hit) buildings collapsed so elegantly in their own footprints. Why was there no general alarm, why no fighter planes? Why less than 3000 deaths when we were told that there were 50,000 people working in the two buildings. And why did nobody remember that other (captured) terrorists had tried to attack the same buildings a few years earlier, and domestic terrorists had blown up a federal building. 9/11 was made into a totally unique, out of the blue, incomprehensible act of aggression, that allowed us to make war on two countries. Even now nobody seems to think that strange. Those wars were "wanted," probably planned, and we are still there: in full force, under a new Administration. Things are hidden from us. Are we the country "for the people by the people?" I don't think so, but we are not supposed to think about that. Orwell in his famous book 1984 saw the future, but he got the date wrong.

Recently I did some research on y2k; easy to do on the internet! Seeing the list of things that did happen made me feel better. It was a financial bonanza for computer companies and others (more than \$300b in the US alone). That made me feel better about our efforts to be prepared in our village. Obviously it was not the complete dud as I thought. y2k really happened, but perhaps easier to fix than had been presented.

Maybe in a few years I shall be more accepting of the other events that still feel unfinished for me.

There were times during the first 8 years of this century when I had doubts about global warming. The government did not believe it. Not all scientists, we were told, accepted that it is happening. Maybe, I thought, it is like y2k, a flash in the pan. One of those things the public gets excited about and then it just fizzles.

But halfway through those eight years I knew that global warming, expressing itself in climate change, is real. True. The pictures of melting glaciers all over the world, the rising ocean some atolls in the Pacific are experiencing, are evidence.

Not only climate change, but the eradication of species: a thousand a year — or is it a day? That story is strongly in my mind, and it fits in with my thoughts about who we, humans, are, Who we have become. From that I can think what the next ten to fifty years might be like.

Many people tell me that I should stop worrying and just enjoy the moment. Yes, I do that also. But I am weird. Knowing what is the probable future of my species makes me feel more prepared, more realistic about the world as it is now. People tell me how beautiful my place is when the grass is mown; gives it the appeal of a garden. I much prefer wild. I try to omit the shorn lawns from my awareness — not difficult because in a week even what now looks like a lawn will look like a neglected field. And the week after that we will have walked paths through a new jungle.

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Every day Public Radio talks about how “confusing” it is to understand the debate about health care.

The debate, so-called, gets a lot less confusing when you accept that it is not about reform of health *care*, but reform of health insurance. Even the president once agreed that the only way to have a working, affordable, health care system is to take out the huge bureaucracy of fifteen hundred health insurance companies that get at least 20% of our insurance payments. Single Payer healthcare, overseen or paid by the government. Or an expansion of Medicare (as if Medicare is wonderful). Medicare probably pays all expenses of a hospital stay but it pays a fraction of a fraction of a visit to a doctor, and the drug program we were given by the previous Administration is a marvel of government promotion of capitalism. Among other provisions it forbids bargaining for cheaper drugs with the pharmaceutical companies — in other words, in America these companies can charge what they want, we have no choice but to pay outrageous prices for even over-the-counter (not needing a prescription) drugs.

As it stands now, Obama’s plan to give us a “reform of health insurance” is, inevitably, going to be worse than what we have now. More complicated, more bureaucracy. What we have now is a broken system. Not too surprising because there are more and more signs that the country itself is broken. The lobbies are too powerful. The big corporations (did you know that almost all corporations pay no taxes at all?) own the big Media, and the Media own “we the people’s” minds. The food corporation (I think ultimately there is only one) produces most of what we live on — and makes us sick and so drives us to the broken health system.

This is a country in decline. We don’t know that. Not yet, anyway. We still spend close to half of our budget — which includes an enormous amount of debts which by now can never be repaid — on arms for future warfare, by drones, in space. Dream on, America...

Of course I am aware that my disgust is misplaced. This country is the crown jewel of capitalism, and that seems to be what we the people want. The money that pours into the coffers of politicians and the Media will see to it that America will remain the country where some people can become millionaires in six months, and once you have your first million, all doors open wide — while the great majority of us are getting poorer every year. We the people are blinded by the few, while the system is trampling us.

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When someone is sick I want to be able to see a doctor. We make a big deal about the right to choose our "own" doctor. Have you ever moved to a new town, where you know hardly anyone yet and you have a sick child? You look in the phone book, there are several pages of doctors, many for children. How do I choose from an ad? My first thought is that the big one-page advertisement must be a doctor who makes a lot of money, and therefore must charge more for seeing my sick child. I pick a doctor, mostly guessing. I make an appointment. Before we can even get in the door I must fill in forms. What insurance do I have, how long have I had it, is the child included. Where do I work, what is my position, and much, much more. Another form for the entire illness history of the child. The doctor makes a diagnosis, prescribes something which I then have to take to a pharmacy, wait for it to be filled (all the time the sick child in the car). Pay the pharmacist the outrageous amounts we pay in America for all medications. In short, a visit to a new doctor in a strange town takes most of a whole day, and it is always expensive.

Now, imagine that before I came to this new town, we lived in French Polynesia, not Papeete, but another island, a small town. Not unlike what the Hawaiian Islands were like, say, fifty years ago. On that island there are two doctors and they both work in the same clinic. We walk in with a sick child, see one of the doctors almost immediately. He not only diagnoses but instead of prescribing drugs he gives us the necessary pills, with instructions. Sends us home. No bill, no complicated forms to fill out. I mumble, we are foreigners, not French. The doctor laughs, Yes, I knew that when you opened your mouth. No trouble. No fee, no paper work. Get well.

The media continually remind us that the "reform of health insurance," as it now is called, is very complicated. In all other civilized countries seeing a doctor is not complicated at all — it is the insurance companies we inserted between the patient and the doctor that make it complicated. After all, they have to make a profit. Insurance is a funny kind of business, the more healthy people they have insured the more money they make. They don't want to deal with sick people, they cut profit! The health insurance companies will be thrilled with a "reform" that requires everyone to buy health insurance, perhaps even with government help, which then becomes a government subsidy to the insurance companies. Good for insurance companies, bad for us.

Almost all people who work in the health industry know that the only system that can improve health **care** is "single payer," leaving insurance companies to insure other unexpected dangers, but not our health and sickness.

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Sometimes I think about who we are. We, humans in the 21st century. Biologically we are part of all life forms, of course. The same atoms, molecules, make our bodies as make trees and plants, rocks probably. The components that our clever scientists can identify in the air are also in us. But we *think* ourselves different. Different and better than all other life forms.

I cannot see that. I do not feel myself different, I feel like a tree with legs, like an ape with imagination.

It is imagination that makes us different. We can imagine things that never were, that are not in experience, but *made* somewhere in our brain, they say. We can make art. We can design and build drone bombers, unmanned, controlled from 6000 miles away. We have invented weapons, and trains, and vacuum cleaners, and tiny machines that are phones but also cameras and computers and more.

We have invented and made wheeled monsters so enormous, with so much power, that they can carry whole mountain tops, load by load, to a furnace that makes electricity while poisoning the air we all breathe — leaving a pit where there was a mountain.

We can fly through the air with the greatest of ease and have forgotten why we need to be at the other side of the planet in half a day.

Humans can lie. Plants cannot lie, no animal can lie. We can even believe our own lies perhaps.

What are we then? The forward edge of an ever improving evolution, or are we a mutation that acts like a cancer: eating our host, the planet, and so destroying ourselves taking with us unknown numbers of species. Leaving a changed planet to others.

Are we part of the rich chaos that is nature, or the deluded manufacturers of a man-made chaotic system of illusions.

Or, are we just a young species, at the threshold of a calmer adulthood. A species that is going through a *Sturm und Drang* period of testing the limits of new powers, as young individuals adjust to new hormones. Can we reach a wiser adulthood when we now seem carried by a tsunami of uncontrolled raw power?

Hard to know from inside.

robert wolff, 29 july 2009