

## QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

Why do very few people ask why? For instance, why should we not question the statement "Capitalism is the obvious and therefore only future for mankind. The only possible future." We seem to take it for granted that capitalism is the only system, or the only system for a democracy, or we don't know of any other. But we never question, although I would think there is a lot to question about how the world is run today.

When I look around, most of the people I know are poor and getting poorer. But they, too, accept that "of course" everything gets more expensive, more fouled up, service of any kind is harder to get and often ineffective, because service has come to be organized to serve the provider, not the one requiring service.

That's just the way it is, they tell me.

The way to where, I ask.

Laughter. *The future*, man!

Many people I know accepted years ago that they probably won't get social security (and they are getting closer each year). Many of my friends and family cannot afford health insurance for themselves; this State generously provides subsidized insurance for children. But the breadwinners can't afford to get sick.

Would it not be a relief, I used to say, if this country—as all other rich countries—had universal health care?

That sounds like communism, they whisper, and communism is bad! Yeah, very bad that communism. Not democratic. No freedom.

What freedom? (You see I cannot stop asking questions).

Well, the freedom to... well, you know, the freedom to... go where you want, live where you want, and all that. People who have been to Europe admit that it must be nice to be able to get good medical treatment for free—but they can't quite believe it. Or, they say, Over there they pay huge taxes!

Yes, true. But evidently they get their money's worth: good (almost free) health care, with an emphasis on prevention (and I know at least two countries where doctors make house calls again - it is cheaper, they say), a less than 40 hour work week, six weeks paid vacation a year, good pensions, good unemployment pay, and so on. Gasoline almost everywhere in the world has always been more than twice what we paid, so they drive small cars that get fabulous mileage.

Not safe, my friends tell me. You're safer in a big car.

Maybe in a country where "everybody" drives huge trucks and vans. Not when everyone else also drives a small car. And the auto magazines I occasionally read when I wait for my car to be serviced often write that it is not true that big cars and trucks are safer— they may even be less safe! We live by myths and half truths, or even lies, and when they are repeated often enough they acquire a certain obviousness. But... (A very useful feature of Hawaiian pidgin language, a sentence with a loose but at the end.)

From the perspective of Europe, or Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, it is unbelievable that 45 million Americans cannot afford any health insurance whatsoever.

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More questions. Why do we have more people locked away than any other industrialized nation, serving infinitely longer sentences? (And I have read that the condition in some of our prisons is worse than in many poor countries). No, we don't ask that why. We are proud of being tough on crime: "three strikes and you're out." Once a sex offender, always a "predator." We guarantee that sex offenders forfeit a more or less normal life: after serving a stiff sentence they are watched and avoided forever after. Felons who have served their time are virtually unemployable. Is it any wonder that recidivism is so high?

We're also the only country that has the death sentence — and the only country that has large numbers of people violently "pro life."

Prison sets an example, people say. It's a deterrent so that other men won't choose a life of crime. Do we really believe that people "choose" a life of crime? Do severe prison sentences work? Does locking a 16-year old away for "life without the possibility of parole" serve any purpose other than revenge? An eye for an eye, and we are both blind.

A large percentage of prisoners is locked away for what we quaintly call "victimless crimes," meaning these people didn't hurt anyone but themselves (perhaps). Are we protecting society by locking them away? Has the number of "drug" users changed in thirty years of a War on Drugs?

All the statistics show that the number of users has not changed much—the drugs change: more potent and more vicious. And, of course, our war on drugs has created a multi-billion dollar underground economy.

Locking someone away costs the government, say, \$50,000 a year. Couldn't we do a lot more good for society as a whole spending it on rehabilitation, re-education, something more positive? But very few of us question.

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Another why. I remember a time when calling a bank and getting a person. Now I get an electronic menu. English, press one. I must listen for ten minutes to all the different options I have, and usually none of them quite fit my question. Until by chance I hit the button that gets me to another electronic voice that tells me that a "communication expert" will talk to me when it is my turn.

Sometimes it will even tell me that there are... seven people are ahead of me, or that... wait time is 11 minutes. It is all endlessly time consuming. I suspect that there is only one person on duty behind the thick layers of electronic choices. The worst are answering machines that do voice recognition. "I hear you say four, if that correct? If it is correct, click 1." That takes half an hour to dictate the various numbers they require me to tell them. Address, order number, shipping number, part number, etc. Occasionally someone actually calls back when I am not home. Usually they send me a printout of the FAQs on their web site. It may be cheaper than having to pay real people, but it is not service.

Cheaper used to mean that the price was less; nowadays cheaper means that the profit margin is greater. That is what capitalism is about, isn't it? Our globalized world is organized to make things easier and cheaper for corporations so that their profits will balloon. But—I hesitate to

even mention this—shouldn't the world be organized to make things better for people? Aren't we... important? Even, yes, let's say it, aren't we more important than profit?

Evidently not.

Trade is fine, it is a human thing to do. But can we forget what trade was for, originally? I have an extra bit of cloth that my daughter has woven; you have an extra pound of butter you have churned. Hey, how about a trade?

But life is not simple any more. It is not about trade, it is about money!

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The concept of "money" boggles the mind — my mind at least. It used to be that money was simply something that facilitated an exchange. Money was based on real value, gold, or even the value of goods and services. Not any more. Money has become the name of an infinitely flexible illusion. It has nothing to do even with the value of the paper it is printed on, because huge, enormous amounts of this so-called money are traded, exchanged, manipulated, on computers. We're talking about imaginary somethings, hocus pocus, and you're a billionaire. You buy an interest in a corporation that is not producing anything but exists for the sole purpose of dealing in money. And you don't pay in paper money, but transfer a number from your computer to someone else's computer. So you have bought yourself a place at the table, but the game is not even honest gambling any more, because chance is too chancy, and there are ways around it.

We used to think millions. Now everything is in billions (in America that means a thousand million). Next year we will have trillionaires. And all those trillions are not real, but figures on a computer. We spend our lives away on money we don't have: credit, at 23% interest if we don't pay up before a certain date. Does anyone remember the word "usury?"

I wrote a thousand more words but trashed them. I don't know much about money (and I don't want to know). I keep myself debt-free, but know only too well that I am part of a System I do not understand, or like.

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Is there a reason why we drive on the right-hand side of the road? I've never read an explanation of that. I grew up in a country where we drove on the left-hand side of the road. Switching over was not that difficult, I found. It takes less than a day—and being in traffic helps. Today many countries have changed to driving on the right, but not all.

Why is the United States the only country any more where we have miles and pounds and gallons? Everybody else uses the metric system, which—once you understand the underlying very simple premise—is much easier to use.

Reading about global warming, climate change, I wondered about the word "tonne:" so many million tonnes of carbon dioxide spewed into the atmosphere. Looked it up: a tonne is a metric ton. Different, of course, from an American ton. Either way a ton, or tonne, is a measure of a large amount of weight. Millions of either tons or tonnes is a disaster.

Has anyone really grasped the enormity of our isolation? This country is responsible for a sizable slice of all those tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> that pollute the atmosphere we share with all beings that need the atmosphere to survive. All six and a half billion people, all animals all over the world.

Yet we are 4% of the world's population, if that, and we refuse to reduce our 20-30% share of (everyone's) pollution. How can we get away with that?

I know, I know. We are the richest, most powerful nation on earth. We can do anything we damn well please. Right?

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There is a whole book of questions I have, to do with why a government even bothers to control, prohibit, prosecute and persecute what we eat, smoke, drink, do in bed. Is that what governments are for?

I have noticed that governments that have the most don'ts are also the ones that most loudly proclaim freedom.

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And why can there be only two political parties in the United States? A few times we've had third party candidates, but it seems those votes were always taken away from the Democrats, guaranteeing a win for the Republicans. Do Republicans sponsor those third parties?

I've never wanted to belong to either party, because it seemed to me that the differences within each party were more obvious than the difference between the two parties. Recent history seems proof that a two party system does not work if one party rules all three branches of government. And maybe the three branches are not really equal; one is more powerful than the others?

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Has anybody asked why, all of a sudden we must quickly invent a new fuel to replace gasoline? And our leader can only talk about ethanol. Surely, even he must know that it takes more energy to make ethanol than we get out of it— and ethanol corrodes the small engines of lawn mowers and weed eaters we cannot do without. And here (our gas is now 15% ethanol) we have noticed that it reduces gas mileage by about 10%.

Overall the scientists say that the emissions from automobiles accounts for some 17% of the total monstrous amounts of carbon dioxide we poison the atmosphere with.

The warming of our atmosphere is the consequence not only of burning huge quantities of oil and coal to generate electricity, but also of deforestation, which is only slightly slowing down (we are running out of forests to eradicate). But we don't talk about that, probably because we know that it takes many hundreds of years to regrow a rain forest.

But then, using ethanol is not about global warming, but about our dependence on foreign oil. Two different things. Doing something about global warming we "seriously consider." But reducing our dependence on foreign oil is a priority.

Don't we have a say in these monstrously important issues? Issues that are important for the survival of our species—isn't that our concern as well as a government's?.

People have asked me, How can we be blamed for global warming, climate change? All we did was push progress. Don't we want progress?

Sometimes I answer by mentioning "sustainable," — how can one small part of a closed ecosystem (our so-called biosphere) be sustainable when it is based on MORE? More for some means less for others.

But few people can think that way. Sustainable is made to mean controlling nature *better*. I doubt that we can better nature.

Bigger, newer, fancier cars, more gadgets and appliances make more waste. Our system is designed for "progress," by which we mean MORE, more of everything. Manufacturers must make a profit, so they advertise to increase an existing need or preferably create a whole new need. Did you ever dream that you "needed" a cell phone, or an iPod? Now we cannot do without one or two. And, of course, get a newer and always better model next year.

Our obsession with progress, more,—in this country, at least—has made us the most wasteful society that ever was. I have known people, whole populations, that use less of everything in a year than we throw away in a day. And plastic (most of it made from oil) is mostly non-biodegradable. It will be with us for thousands of years.

Big headlines the other day: China is close to polluting the air as much as America does. In small print, the article added that, of course, China has seven times as many people as America does: the average Chinese uses one seventh as much energy as the average American uses.

We share the atmosphere with all the world's people (and plants and animals). It shames me to know that we, in this country, contribute 20-30% of the junk that is spewed into the atmosphere world-wide, and we are only 4% or less of all humans. Not fair.

Who said civilization is fair?

And then I think that even within this country there are enormous differences between people. We like to think in averages. The average size of a house today is 2300 sq.ft. (a generation ago it was half that), but that means there are some people who live in palaces, and millions who are homeless. Saw a statistic the other day, that the average income of a manager of a "hedge fund" (whatever that is) is 346 million dollars a year — almost a million a day! One of them "earned" well over a billion in a year. Can that be? How can they spend even a portion of that?

We need a kick in the butt. Let's talk how global warming affects me. Or, more powerfully, how does it affect my business. How does it affect the price of food, the availability of water, worldwide crops? Because global warming is not our problem only, all life on the planet is in danger. I know that some of the foods I buy have gone up at least 50% (now I grow more of my own). Because of fuel prices, they say. But somehow the higher prices we pay for almost everything are not counted in the formula that determines inflation. Maybe I do not understand what inflation is. More likely, I do not understand politics.

Our leader says that the economy is more urgent to worry about than global warming. "We have a war to fight. I have not heard any popular reaction to those statements.

If we are indeed the richest, most powerful nation of the world, shouldn't we be the model of how to deal with global warming? And inequality? And injustice? And, and, and...

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Shouldn't we have been more prepared for Hurricane Katrina? There were warnings.

Shouldn't we have been more prepared for what we now call nine-eleven? There were warnings. There was maybe an hour between hijacking four planes and hitting the twin towers, then the Pentagon, and one was forced to crash. Not a fighter plane in the air anywhere near. And I have always wanted to have an expert explain to me how those buildings could collapse so perfectly, falling straight down into their own foundation. And then a third, smaller building, collapsing from the shock of seeing the other two implode? I have seen movies of buildings inside a city that were blasted on purpose—another, bigger and higher building had to be built there. I was always under the impression that it took specialists to know where to put the charges, and how to fire them one by one just so, so that the building implodes on itself.

Shouldn't we have been more prepared for the after effects of the air in the heart of New York, thick with debris and who knows what chemicals even days and weeks after 9-11, and thus prepared for medical consequences?

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Why are we in Iraq?

The Democratic (majority in) Congress could not stop the war by setting a date for withdrawal. Our leader was adamant that we cannot withdraw troops. Indeed, we need more troops, he insisted. For what? Victory. And what does victory mean? The end of terror everywhere, for always?

No, we don't ask why we should (still) be there. We won the war, we got rid of Saddam Hussein. A new Iraqi government was democratically elected, we handed over sovereignty (did we have it to hand over?) — so why are we there?

Over the years we have heard a series of answers to why we are there. Lately we are told that the reason we are (still) there is to establish a democracy in the middle of this Muslim part of the world — and this new government needs our help. They are a sovereign nation; did they ask us? Democracy imposed by force? And if force does not work, more force?

Then the other day we were told that now our leader is thinking we should stay there for a long, long time, "like Korea." We kept troops in South Korea to keep an eye on North Korea—and yet, under our very eyes, one of the poorest nations in the world, a gruesome dictatorship, managed to make atom bombs and tested missiles. Ahem.

Where is the North Korea of Iraq that we must keep an eye on?

Now I see it: Iran.

That explains why we have been building an enormous embassy—a self-sufficient city—and why we built a number of "permanent bases" in Iraq. That then must have been in the plan from

the beginning, and the WMD, the connection with Al-Qaeda, democracy in the Middle East, oh and another hundred-year war against terror, were just a facade?

Of course oil was never mentioned as a reason for regime change in Iraq.

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Our world has become strange and almost alien to me. While I was busy doing other things, living a life, having a career, "they" changed the world when I was not looking. Globalization sounded good, but we were not prepared for outsourcing, or electronic menus to replace people jobs, or a flood of new gadgets we were supposed to buy on an income that bought increasingly less. While we were mesmerized by the bigger and higher definition television screens entertaining us 24 hours a day, wars were fought, people died, two million people fled Iraq, the climate of the world is changing. Our world is no longer the world I knew. This country is harsher, coarser, maybe dumber, than during some other years I recall.

Now that I think of it, we always meddled in other countries' affairs, but it was done in the background, not with shock and awe. Dropping our mighty might in the middle of the Middle East, which everyone knew was a cauldron of problems anyway, we seem to have stirred up more violent terrorism than ever before?

Not in my name, certainly. But then, of course I was not asked, and the people who I chose to represent me in Congress were swept along in the fear we were told we must all fear.

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We need to ask more questions.

We need to ask the big questions behind the what-to-do questions. How or when we get out of Iraq is obviously important, but in order to be able to talk about that, we need to know why we should be there in the first place.

We need to know what the Constitution says about a unitary presidency (particularly in a war that is waged for slippery, changing reasons, getting vaguer, grander, more questionable..).

Why should we have a war on drugs when its utility is questionable. And, closely related, is it really necessary to be that "tough on crime?" It is not shameful to study what other societies are doing (or not doing). In fact it is smart; we might learn from other people's experience. Isn't that how humans have distinguished themselves from the rest of creation for thousands of years? We learn from others, or even from our own yesterday's mistakes. (For instance, we could have learned from our own fairly recent history that big enormous armies cannot win against guerrillas, resisters, insurgents, terrorists.)

We need to ask why we need such an enormous military budget when the wars we have been fighting and are likely to fight in the near future are street fights. If we cut the military budget we might actually be able to pay for universal health care without pain, and assure Social Security beyond the year 2075.

We need to know the big picture. We cannot afford to be silenced because we are told to be scared of "terror," trust those who are currently in power, they will take care of us. We need to be free to care for ourselves, our family and neighbors, our village, our town. Many states are already doing what the federal government should have done.

We need to have many and calm discussions about what terrorism is, and how to deal with it. How have others dealt with it? How successful were they? How successful were we with out own, home-grown terrorists?

I think we need even ask realistic questions of Muslims and others: Why are you people mad at us? I know they would tell us. They have told us, many times.

But our media (and our leadership) tell us that Muslims are mad at us because they envy us our freedom. Come now, do we really believe that?

We need to ask in depth questions about the way our economy is structured, almost wholly to benefit the top of the pyramid. Is that what we want? Did we ask for that? Who decides these things anyway? Are we not at least unhappy, and perhaps even mad, at the pharmaceutical companies that are allowed by our government to charge us double for the drugs they sell elsewhere for half or less that price? Need we accept this system?

We need to look farther ahead than the next election, even if that is the horizon of politicians, and we need to look beyond the next quarter's statement of profit and losses (if we can trust the figures) that is the horizon of corporations.

We need to plan together with all others who suffer and will suffer the consequences of global warming. We need to observe very carefully how all kinds of animals (and even plants) deal with the unique effects of a warming atmosphere in their unique environment. We need to talk with people all over the world. There are areas that feel effects earlier than others: a number of low island countries in the Pacific already notice the rising of the ocean by inches; some of them fear (know!) that their islands will disappear altogether in the not too far future.

We are not alone.

Of course I know there are people who think of these and weightier issues. We rarely hear about them on the Media, or in the political sphere, because we have made ourselves a very noisy world, where corporations who run the world not only make us want "things," but are yelling and screaming so loudly that we cannot hear the thinking that goes on.

Too bad—dangerously too bad!