

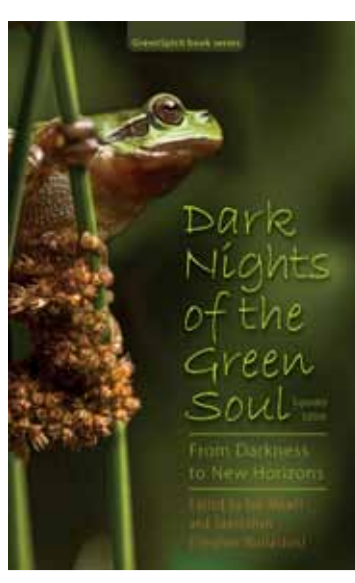
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From Darkness to New Horizons (expanded edition)

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Reading the Signs

Why I Shall Keep Getting Up in the Mornings

Marian Van Eyk McCain

*How long I sat beside Calypso I don't know.
Hunger and weariness vanished, and only after the sun was
low in the west I plashed on through the swamp,
strong and exhilarated as if never more to feel any mortal care.*

~ JOHN MUIR

A friend tells me that lately, instead of leaping out of bed each morning, he's been lying there thinking about what's going wrong in the world and how helpless he feels about it. "Everywhere you look", he says, "It's bad news. Climate change, peak oil, species going extinct, rainforest vanishing..." He was always a cheerful, optimistic man, full of vitality. He's sixty years old, fit, competent, hard-working. Yet now, possibly for the first time, he's tasting despair.

Another friend e-mails that he, too, feels pessimistic nowadays. That man was a hippie once. He still sports long hair, plays guitar, wears beads, likes walking barefoot. "The word 'Earth' means retro 60s to all but us in the tiny loyal cadre", he writes. "Nature is incomprehensible to people."

He laments the collapse of several 'earth and spirit' publications he once subscribed to. He deplores the lack of activism in universities, remembering those golden days when campuses everywhere were alive with hope and revolution. He says: "Intelligent, heart centred, open minded people are a shrinking demographic."

A woman friend tells me that when the talk in her kitchen turned to environmental issues, her twenty-year old son banged the table with his fist. Despair, for him, has turned to a dark, corrosive anger.

I know the feeling.

I, too, visualise hurling bricks through Government windows. Often, I weep. Sometimes depression settles like a cloud and I feel powerless, immobilised, out-of-date, bleak. Why get out of bed?

And yet...

Although civilisations have risen and fallen for six thousand years, and although, for the first time ever, the threatened collapse is now on a global scale, there was never such a time of deep understanding, either.

Like the cartoon fish who jumps clear of the lake and, looking back, says with wonderment, "Oh, so *that's* water!" we're the first generation of *Homo sapiens* to blast ourselves out beyond Earth's orbit and actually *see* our entire, swirling, blue-green planet.

Likewise, we're the first to grasp the full extent of the damage we've caused.

Until now, like unsupervised toddlers running riot in the living room, we were too immature to comprehend the results of our actions.

For millennia, those slow runners, understanding, humility, ethics and morality, have been panting way behind the swifter feet of opportunity, greed, inventiveness and humans' innate love of novelty. But though ethics and morality still get slowed down by the blisters of religion and party politics, understanding and humility may finally be running almost fast enough to close the gap.

It's said that whoever fails to understand history is doomed to repeat it. But now we know much about the dynamics behind the rise and fall of civilisations. And it's dawning on us that maybe Gaia is wiser than us. A chorus of ecologists, archaeologists, anthropologists and historians is singing us the facts, loud and clear.

Jared Diamond's book *Collapse* teases out the various factors that interact to determine whether a culture survives or collapses.¹ Ronald Wright's *A Short History of Progress*, reveals the eerie similarity of the collapse process in different eras and cultures,² and Joseph Tainter makes a persuasive argument for what he sees as a common denominator in all cases, including our own, i.e. the ever-shrinking margin between the cost of expansion and the gains from it and how the two must ultimately, inevitably cross.³

We are beginning to understand. And I believe we are beginning to act.

I'm involved with a lot of individuals and organisations and read (mostly online) a range of newspapers, magazines, e-zines etc. And I discern a rising interest in – and concern for – the Earth everywhere I look.

"Yes", I reply to my hippie friend, "some magazines have folded and yes, consumerism rules, but I've noticed more and more environmental websites appearing every day. More 'alternative', subversive blogs, more green articles in magazines and newspapers. There's mention of climate change in the media every day now. Twenty years ago, that was non-existent."

When I start thinking of signs of hope, renewal and transformation with which to reassure him, suddenly I see them everywhere; glimpses of light between the fence palings of gloom.

"Ethical investment has risen hugely" I write. "Even soap opera scripts touch on green issues from time to time; everyone is pressuring the US to sign up to climate protocols; vegetarianism is the fastest growing food trend in the UK; recycling is mainstream: everyone's buying organic veggies; farmers' markets proliferate; hotels proclaim their use of eco-friendly cleaning products; FORTUNE reported, when I was writing this article, that 84% of CEOs wish they worked less, and 55% are willing to give up salary to do so. There are hundreds of little signs (and big ones too) of a sea-change in awareness."

My friend is right that his hippie model is retro – and I think well, perhaps that is a good thing. Haven't we all grown up and learned much more about the Universe and our place in it since the sixties? I certainly have.

Yes, it's true that, as he says, mainstream culture has moved far from Nature, and Governments and multinationals are conspiring to trash ecosystems. And yes, the culture of consumerism seems unstoppable, like some huge Titanic heading straight for an iceberg. But, unlike my friend, I see the level of concern and the desire to do something about it rising fast.

Am I, I wonder, just being a 'cockeyed optimist'? No, I don't think so. There is evidence of that rise, everywhere you look.

When my hippie friend bewails the collapse of Earth and spirit publications and organisations, the lack of student activism etc., I tell him he's looking for the keys under the wrong lamp-post. "Revolutions used to begin on campus", I say, "but they don't any more. They begin in new places. Like in industry, when they start to connect the dots and use their competitiveness to try and out-green each other. Like in women's organisations. Think 'Code Pink'. Like in African and Indian villages and in the Amazon rainforest and the *favelas* of Rio. Like when health insurance companies pay on 'alternative' treatments because Wellness education and Reiki are cheaper than doctors and drugs. Like someone coining the term 'Nature Deficit Disorder' and discovering that ADHD is healable by taking kids back into the woods. Like the 'Mommy track' suddenly becoming trendy for career women and the ongoing popularity of 'downshifting'... and on and on. I know that's a long way from our sorts of radical thinking, but it's the beginning of a big shift. Whether the whole shift will happen in time to save many of the things we hold dear, who knows? We can only hope."

And I challenge his statement that "Intelligent, heart centred, well read, open minded people are a shrinking demographic." "If that's so," I say to him, "How do you explain the phenomenon of what sociologist Paul Ray dubbed the 'Cultural Creatives'?"⁴ Ray and his colleagues estimated, based on extensive research, that in 2000, there were fifty million 'Cultural Creatives' in America – about a quarter of the adult population – and probably eighty to ninety million in Europe.

They found that while the other two main societal groups: the 'traditionals' (old fashioned conservatives) and the 'moderns' (trendy mainstream materialists) are actually shrinking, this third force is quickly expanding.

Cultural Creatives didn't just appear like mushrooms overnight. We've actually been here all along, busily focusing on our pet issues – nutrition, health, spiritual growth, alternative education, peace, environment, feminism, animal rights, social justice... whatever.

What's new is the realisation that there can be no good health without better education, nor vice versa. Globalisation, multinationals, violence, war, drugs, junk food, degraded topsoil, materialism, obesity, species loss, ADHD, cancer... they're all faces of the same monster. We're realising that patriarchal values harm both women and the Earth, that people cannot live healthily without a spiritual dimension to their lives and that peace, social justice and ecology cannot be disentangled. It's as though many tributaries are flowing together to become one mighty river. All issues are really one issue.

Which is: either we find ways of living together sustainably and harmoniously on this planet, or we'll all perish – taking many other species with us. Either we work together to find solutions, to create a new culture, a new, more humble way of being, or we're toast.

I take heart from a metaphor that Buckminster Fuller came up with many years ago. Remember the trimtab factor?⁵

In case you don't: ships have little flanges on their rudders, called trimtabs, which are vital to their steering. The trimtab on a huge ocean liner may be less than a foot square but just a tiny shift in its direction can cause the whole ship to steer away from the iceberg and into safety.

I truly believe that the cultural creatives – that percentage of human beings whose minds and hearts are fixed on deepening their understanding of the current planetary crisis, seeking solutions and walking their talk in the way they live their own daily lives – are the trimtab factor. After all, only about eleven percent of the US population were actively involved in making the American Revolution happen. Many worked against it. But it happened.

Of course, our efforts may not be enough. We've messed up so badly that Gaia may decide to get rid of us. She could do that with one flick of her tail if she deemed it necessary – all it takes is a deadly mutation in a virus. If that happens, well *c'est la vie*, and whatever comes in the next few million years may be an improvement. The Universe is still evolving, after all. We are just a blip.

But that is no reason to stay in bed and not try.

History gives us many clues. For example, Tainter writes that complex societies are often built up from the agglomeration of smaller, formerly independent and autonomous units (the EU is an example) and when collapse happens, and an empire decomposes, the building blocks often separate out again.⁶

We need not wait for collapse. The best tactic to defeat the many-tentacled monster may be preemptive, voluntary decomposition. As, for example, in the creation of small, sustainable, bioregional units, the return of money into local economies, the localisation of food and other necessities, the lessening of dependence on centralised systems in every way possible. It is in our own interest to do this. When people talk about 'saving the planet' what they really mean is saving people and the things people love. The planet isn't going anywhere. Not yet, anyway, though it may disappear into a black hole eventually.

Meanwhile, I intend to keep getting up each morning, keep doing whatever I can to make things better and keep noticing all the hopeful signs. They are everywhere.

* * *

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