

Do we live in an insane world?

Every so often in my discipline, I am struck by the sheer insanity of our civilization. There seem to be so many things out of whack that one begins to wonder if humans are truly a sane, sensible species. Since it is too hard for me to conclude that our entire species is deranged, I often wonder if it is just me that is the crazy one. Please, let me know; but, first, consider the following.

Ask yourself, are the observations below indicative of a civilization that is rational, composed, altruistic, and empathetic or, rather, one that is irrational, erratic, selfish, and heartless? If the latter adjectives are better descriptors of our modern world, isn't it about time that we challenged these tendencies and trends both individually and collectively?

We produce more food than people can eat but about a billion of us still suffer from severe nutritional deficits and millions literally starve. One of the necessities for life is food. Historically, largely due to contingencies brought by inhospitable weather or overpopulation, some human populations faced one of the more extreme forms of human suffering — starvation. However, in the modern world, with advances in food production and increased usage of the Earth's soils and its aquifers, more food is produced than is needed. It is no doubt true that weather and population pressures still make it difficult for many to obtain sufficient local food supplies, but the greatest barriers to feeding the world's population today stem from an unwillingness of those that have to make sure everyone else gets enough. Given the nimety of food that most in our society consume, aren't all of us responsible for the existence of this example of horrific human suffering?

One of the major reasons people worldwide aren't able to get food is because they can't afford it and, more and more, they can't even grow it. They can't afford it because their local sources of nutritious crops are being displaced by exportable crops — coffee, bananas, cotton — to be shipped to people like us. And they can't grow their own food because the land they once managed has either become increasingly monopolized by big business who support export crops, has undergone damming, or has succumb to urbanization and sprawl. Consider yourself fortunate if you have food on the table each evening and work to help others have the same.

Let's say that we want to make amends. As a small step, perhaps we can at least do away with the oft-repeated phrase, "I'm starving," which greatly exaggerates our temporary hunger and distorts our sense of the real hunger that exists elsewhere. If you want to do more, contact agencies that are trying to feed the families and children in local communities and elsewhere. For those interested in going even further, support agricultural policies that foster sustainable and equitable production and distribution nationally and globally.

Our toilet water is cleaner than the water that the majority of world's people are forced to drink. It is an indisputable fact that humans need water to survive. This shouldn't come as a surprise since most humans are 60–70 percent water by composition. Additionally, all animals need water too. But humans and animals need clean water to live healthily; polluted water will not suffice. Unfortunately, while many among us could survive on our toilet water, literally billions of humans are without enough clean potable water for basic needs; consider that in Africa 36 percent of the people do not have access to safe drinking water, and in Asia the number is a miserable 19 percent (Halweil et al., 2004).

While most of us get our tap water via water treatment plants, worldwide, people still largely rely on untreated water. And unfortunately, this untreated water is too often polluted and full of pathogens such as, E-coli, salmonella, shigella, etc. These waterborne diseases kill nearly 2,000,000 people a year, a number which doesn't highlight the many more millions that suffer from severe diarrhea and other ailments brought on by contaminated water.

But the insanity goes further than just that we have clean water and they don't. Despite the relative safety of our tap water, inexplicably, more and more of us are spending about 1,000 times as much for bottled water. The bottled water that we buy often comes from other municipal taps no better than our own and isn't regulated nearly as well either. We also use our treated, drinkable water to make sure our home pools are clear (even as we add chlorine to disinfect), our lawns are deep green, and our cars are shiny and sparkling. Really, if one of the several billion people that rarely gets adequate potable water for basic needs were to see the way many of us use our treated water, wouldn't they be right to characterize us as insane?

Ridiculously, it wouldn't even cost that much to provide sufficient clean water to the world's entire population; yes, that's right, to all 6,300,000,000 (and counting) of us. Ten billion dollars is sufficient to do so (which is just over \$1 per planetary human). This amount isn't insignificant but it is less than we are willing to spend on superfluous things, such as makeup (we spend \$18 billion a year), perfume (we spend \$15 billion a year), and ice cream (Europeans alone spend \$11 billion annually) (Halweil et al., 2004). But it is imperative that we look and smell "good," isn't it? (Pardon the sarcasm.)

Also, we seem to still love to burn our money. Consider that in the U.S. alone, we are still spending over \$50,000,000,000 (that's right, \$50 billion!) on cigarettes each year (Parker-Pope). We are apparently much more interested in lighting up than ensuring that the world's humans are getting enough to water to drink.

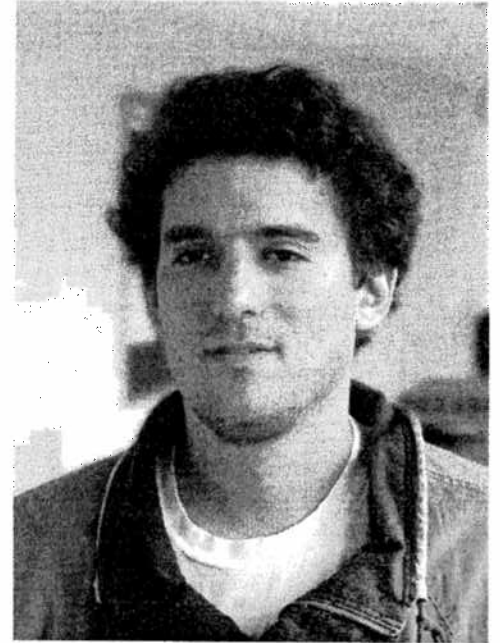
We have bombs to blow up the Earth several times over and, yet, we continue to build more. This has got to be the most insane item on the list; though there is definitely competition for this title. Purportedly, we build these weapons to protect ourselves. How many bombs do we need? Consider that the U.S. alone has manufactured and deployed more than 70,000 nuclear weapons in the past half-century (Schwartz, 1998). Must we have enough bombs to exterminate entire hemispheres? Doesn't anyone wonder why many of our politicians are so willing to spend our tax dollars on bombs and more bombs? Might it be because they listen more to the contractors who get filthy rich building them than they do to us? So much of what is done relating to armaments is done behind the public's critical lens. Shouldn't something so dangerous be much more carefully considered and monitored by the masses? Is it wise to put such incredibly forceful materials in the watchful eyes of so few? And crazier still, if only as small portion of what we currently spend on these truly massive weapons of mass destruction were siphoned off and spent on many of the basic necessities for humans — such as clean water, nutritious food, desired birth control, etc. — wouldn't our planet be a more peaceful place? Why is making bigger and more destructive munitions the preferred way to bring about peace, justice and security? I guess it matters how many dollars are reaped from "peacemaking." (Relatedly, if you want

to see a running tally of what the Iraqi war has cost us in American taxpayers' dollars, go to: <www.costofwar.com>).

The U.S. is the richest country in the world and yet we hear all the time that it is lacking in money. How many times have you read that we don't have enough money for any of following: (1) nationalized health care; (2) climate change remediation; (3) public schools; (4) unemployment support and job training; (5) post secondary education; (6) food assistance; or, (6) clean energy sources? Yet, many countries in the world, who, on paper, have much less money than we do, are meeting these needs and more. How do they accomplish it? Well, for one, they have much, much smaller militaries. Do you realize that, according to the State Department's own numbers, the U.S. spends 33 percent of the entire world's military budget when it has less than 5 percent of the world's people! Second, they don't waste as much. Consider that Americans consume phenomenally more energy (per capita) than other "developed" countries; 73 percent more than Japan, 114 percent more than Germany, and 88 percent more than France! Stated another way (beware of whiplash), the U.S. currently uses more energy than China, Japan, Russia and India combined (Phrasebase)! Yet, when you mention energy conservation as a national priority, you usually hear that we need more oil, coal, natural gas and nuclear sources, rather than less. Third, in many other developed countries, welfare goes more directly to the people than to the corporations. As documented in an in-depth study published in the Boston Globe, big corporations in the U.S. get more welfare than the combined total allotted to the core programs of the social welfare state, including Aid to Families with Dependent Children, student aid, housing, food and nutrition (Sennott). It seems that we must be more insistent on our demands for basic needs for our citizens because other (corporate) entities have the bulk of our political representatives' attention.

Did I cover all the insanities? Nope. Wondering what else there could possibly be to compete with these? How about: *We are dependent on finite energy sources, yet, species that rely on non-renewable resources are doomed to rapidly become extinct. Current U.S. per capita consumption of goods would necessitate at least three more Earths if replicated worldwide, yet the drum, "All people should be so lucky to consume like Americans," beats on. The world's rainforest has lost 50 percent of its extent, yet we continue to raze more of it seemingly unabated. More tigers live as pets in the U.S. now than live in the wild throughout the world, yet tigers that attack humans are considered overly vicious and expendable.* The list could go on. But don't despair, there is hope.

All of the above circumstances or trends can be reversed. It all depends on our priorities. Many want a quick fix. And while a quick fix is possible in some cases, unfortunately, a slow fix is much more likely. We didn't get into these messes overnight and, thus, it will take more than



a fortnight to get out of them. But the question we should ask is, "Are we moving in the right direction?" In cases where we are, we must continue. In cases where we aren't, it is time to turn around. Don't feel like you have to do it all yourself. There are many organizations of people who are working diligently on these matters. All one needs to do is a little searching. In Illinois, a good place to start might be the Illinois Student Environmental Network (ISEN) (webpage: www.isenonline.org) or F.A.R.M. (Farmers against Rural Messes). A long list of environmental organizations in Illinois can be found at Eco-usa's webpage: www.eco-usa.net/orgs/il.shtml (they also have lists for other states; just modify the last part of the address with a different state's postal abbreviation.) At a national and international scale, there are too many groups to name but one can find many of them at The World Directory on Environmental Organizations (webpage: www.interevironment.org/wd/). As more and more people become acutely aware of the insanities around them, we'll be better prepared to tackle them, remedy them, and reverse them thorough collective spirit and action.

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