

The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

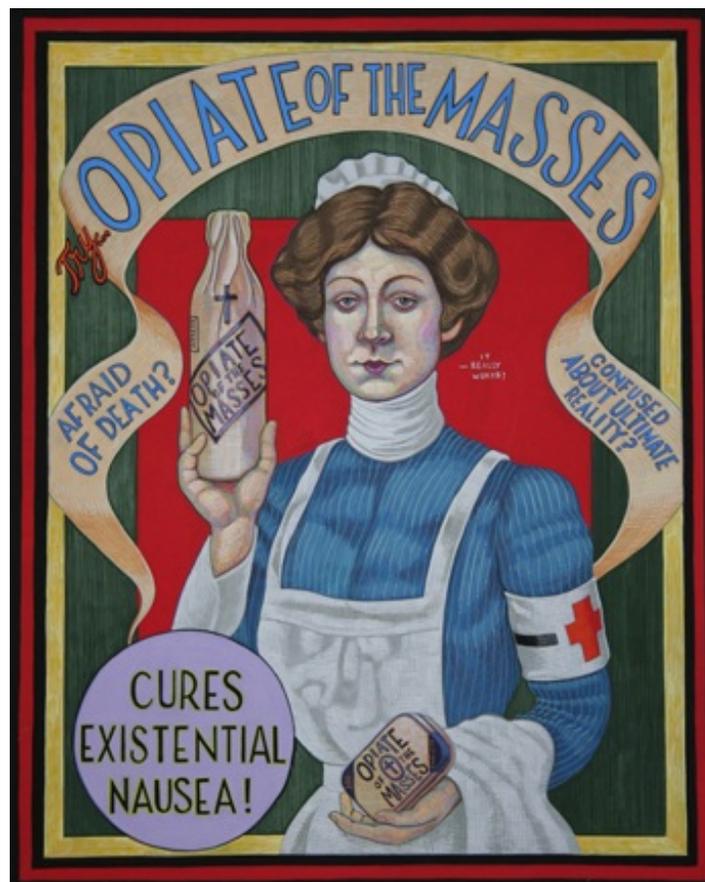
Crisis Blogging: Opiate of the Masses or Catalyst for Change?

Posted by [Nate Hagens](#) on March 28, 2009 - 5:15pm in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Topic: [Sociology/Psychology](#)

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There are over [100 million blogs on the internet](#), a good many of them being rants/musings/analysis about the various social, environmental, economic, etc. ills that face global society. (Ours is primarily about energy.)



Is the creative freedom ubiquitously expressed on the internet an ersatz expression for real change? Or is it accelerating knowledge and thereby progress? More questions below the fold.

Most long time readers know (at least) two things about me: 1) I view the business as usual trajectory as being constrained by more than just oil - there are many other physical and environmental limitations as well as biological/cultural limits on current trajectory (such as habituation, addiction, cognitive overload, obesity, behavioural neural grooves, hard-wiring for competing for social status, etc.) and 2) I view the future as a dynamic probability distribution, meaning there are some trajectories more likely than others, but nothing is set in stone. I do not know what is going to happen with the intertwining of energy, economics and the environment.

That is why I spend time here, in hopes that integrative and lateral discussion in a high signal-to-noise forum will accelerate cultural movement towards a society which, at a minimum, is 'less unsustainable' in its use of energy and other resources. In a sentence, I 'feel' that what we are doing is meaningful.

ALL TALK

1970's environmental icon, [Gus Speth](#), Director of Yale Graduate School of Forestry, said in his 2004 book 'Red Sky at Morning', that the greatest failing of his generation was it's ability to 'talk', and not act. (paraphrased) Most of the environmental success stories of that era (DDT, Chlorofluorocarbons, unleaded gas, etc.) had smoking guns, some evidence of immediate problem. Because of our [evolved steep discount rates](#) (delayed discounting), we disproportionately value the present over the future. This phenomenon is magnified by the centrality of the stock market in our culture, which focuses on quarterly/yearly earnings. Our diets lead to serotonin deficiency in many people, and many other addictions heighten our aggregate level of short-term thinking.

There are a great many people (though still a minority) in the world that realize we have problems. Most are focused on one small area they are passionate about or have knowledge on. They blog, eloquently. They dig for facts, and share them. They send blog information, via Twitter and get 'excited' at new information. They find out some inside scoop on an energy consultancy being wrong 8 years out of 9 on price forecasts, and feel vindicated by sharing a chart of such. They correctly forecast an unsustainable orgy of credit is going to cause a 50% haircut in the stock market, and spend 10 hours a day following the grisly details, sipping cold beer with a laptop near the fireplace. They find something outrageous in the news and email it to all their friends - 'Joe -read this -can you believe this is happening? Amazing.' At some point in the past 50 years, perhaps correlated with television becoming a core part of our culture, we have amassed a collective belief that conveying facts via 'words and communication' will somehow magically lead to change. Bloggers have carried this baton forward in the modern generation. Pissed off? Worried? Concerned about XYZ? Let's blog about it. Obviously the facts will lead to someone figuring out a way to solve the problem.

With so many planetary crises, there are a lot of us 'talking'; in speeches, in papers, in meetings, in conferences, and increasingly on the blogosphere. But how much of this is just information-disguised-as-peacock-feathers? Are we competing for who can articulate the problems we face in the most beautiful, interesting and compelling way? How much of blogging about the world and paper presentations at conferences is a maladaptive social response of a wired and activism-suppressed culture habituated to 'better understanding the problems', as if understanding alone would keep the worst at bay?

THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

As this is the weekly Campfire, let me frame these questions within a thought experiment:

Imagine that someone you absolutely believe (god, an omniscient alien, your mother, a republican talk show host, tarot card reader, etc. whoever it might be for you personally) told you with 100% certainty that the worst case scenario WAS going to happen, and that by say, 2014 there would be permanent blackouts, no food on grocery store shelves, mad-max communities, basically A World Made By Hand, in relatively

short order.

If you KNEW this, and internalized it to the point where it felt 100% certain, would you change what you are doing now? Would you call all your friends and hold emergency town meetings to get regional agricultural and resilience programs started? Would you camp outside your senators office entreating him/her to initiate immediate consumption taxes on Veblen goods, etc.? Would you start growing your own food and meeting and engaging your neighbors? Would there be fear and outrage?

Or would there be fear and apathy? Would you say - well - its been fun - we have 5 more years to party on. Let's go to Africa while we can, start pouring the libations more freely, quit your job, cash out what's left of your 401k at a penalty, and go hedonistic for 60 months?

Or would you do nothing, really? Would that information, even in its certainty, not change your daily routine, of surfing the net, finding out more interesting information, searching for unexpected reward as long as there was not too much physical effort required, etc.?

Events are making it increasingly clear to me, that the scale of change needed in our institutions and leadership is so large that our government is essentially 'too big to change', and that change has to come from the ground up. I worry though, that just like the environmentalists of the past generation, many of whom foresaw limits to growth and were very articulate about its details and timing, we talking about the upcoming energy train wreck, with oil at \$50 and natural gas under \$4, may be just alleviating our consciences, and that there is enough information out there now to see the sweet spot of the default future distribution, without further number torture.

After you've thought these issues through, here is perhaps a more important question: if you knew with certainty the worst cases would NOT arrive, would you change your behavior then? What would be the inflection point? Events themselves, or waiting for others to act and joining in?

CONCLUSION

I 'try' to have balance between my online efforts and what I do in the real world - gardening, speeches to local colleges and groups, learning how to make wine and other skills. But it is difficult. Because the gap between where we are and where we need to be seems SO large.

Perhaps just a few more posts. I think then things will change....



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