

[The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

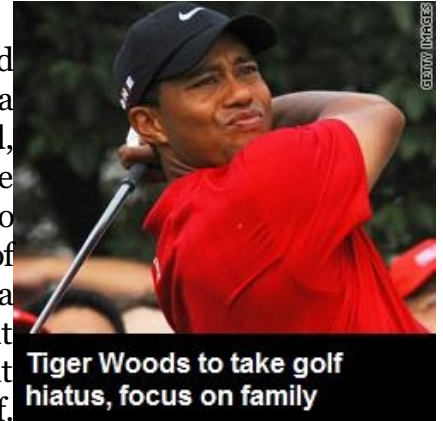
Discussions about Energy and Our Future

The World to Take Economic Hiatus, Focus on Resilience

Posted by [Nate Hagens](#) on December 13, 2009 - 9:43am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Topic: [Sociology/Psychology](#)

To me there are many parallels between Tiger Woods' situation and the broader socio-economic predicament we find ourselves in circa 2009. Tiger, until very recently arguably the most recognized, respected and wealthiest athlete in the world, has fallen from grace and then some in the span of 2 short weeks. He underwent no ostensible change during this time, other than that certain aspects of his life once hidden, suddenly came to public light. Backed into a corner, Tiger has chosen a path of redemption and change, which at least for the moment requires him to give up the one thing that brought him fame and fortune to begin with: the game of golf. However, he chose this path after the damage was already done.



Expand to an OECD culture scale, where on the surface we have decades of relatively straight line economic growth, more countries joining the ranks of the 'wealthy', and nearing 3 generations of world peace. Though readers of this website are aware that this is somewhat illusory, as these gains have been subsidized by a one time gift of stored sunlight. Though we have yet to have a similar 'cadillac crashing into fire hydrant and rear view windows smashed with 3-wood' moment in our civic discourse, this moment seems to be getting closer. Could you imagine Obama, or Geithner, or Bernanke, acknowledging that we are shoveling fuel into a runaway train, and instead of '[spending our way!](#)' to recovery (the Tiger Woods equivalent of sex with yet another woman before he was discovered), someone in this country took such a stand, *before* it became a last resort?

Tonight's Campfire is an imaginary such admission, as usual followed by some open ended questions.

Faced with an [avalanche](#) of women coming forward claiming to have had affairs with the married Tiger Woods, the world's greatest golfer posted this on his website yesterday:

From [Tigerwoods.com](#):

TIGER WOODS TAKING HIATUS FROM GOLF

I am deeply aware of the disappointment and hurt that my infidelity has caused to so

many people, most of all my wife and children. I want to say again to everyone that I am profoundly sorry and that I ask forgiveness. It may not be possible to repair the damage I've done, but I want to do my best to try.

I would like to ask everyone, including my fans, the good people at my foundation, business partners, the PGA Tour, and my fellow competitors, for their understanding. What's most important now is that my family has the time, privacy, and safe haven we will need for personal healing.

After much soul searching, I have decided to take an indefinite break from professional golf. I need to focus my attention on being a better husband, father, and person.

Again, I ask for privacy for my family and I am especially grateful for all those who have offered compassion and concern during this difficult period.

There are many things he COULD have said: 'my family situation is my own business', 'there is a conspiracy to slander my name', 'no comment', etc. However the weight of the evidence (and perhaps the influence of his wife), led to a pretty laid bare confession. This is what addicts do when they hit bottom and run out of options. Tiger hit bottom (socially speaking, he's still a billionaire) and took the path not of denial, or disregard, but of responsibility, sacrifice (golf and probably money), and contrition. Tiger represented the pinnacle of success in our culture, yet having sex with *many* women while his wife cared for 2 young children is such a story of taboo to our moral fiber that it narrowed his options, down to basically one...

When I heard about this last night the situation struck me as a microcosm of our larger energy, economic and environmental situation. So much of the salient and negative aspects have been either advertised or rationalized away, that real recognition of OECD insolvency, and our inability to service our oversized debts and unproductive infrastructure in an energy poor, consumption/population rich environment will someday create a serious watershed moment. But at this point, 'the end of economic growth' is still a taboo phrase in our country. It will take some shocking revelations from someone of authority for people to viscerally question and then grasp our real situation. Personally I think many people are looking for some sort of public admission/recognition of our situation. Stop dancing around the truth with half measures meant to regain our former (declining) trajectory and come out with the truth cannons.

How might a similar speech from Obama appear? Though he is (clearly) not to blame for the OECD consumption orgy, he happens to be the commander at its terminus, and as such has opportunities that few others in history do. Unpopular as it might sound, here is the 'society-wide equivalent' of Tiger's admission:

Fellow Americans, fellow citizens of the planet, I speak before you a humbled man. I have become deeply aware of the reasons for the disappointment and hurt present in our modern societies. Though no fault, or at least very little, of my own, I feel a responsibility as the leader of what has been considered the greatest nation on earth to speak the truth, the truth not as a politician, but as a human animal on an ecologically full planet.

Our model of equating spending and throughput as our metric for success no longer works. For too long we have been able to issue debt to pay for our consumption, not just the USA, but all countries that rely on currencies that have no backing in our real wealth: our land, ecosystems and natural resources. We did this because we could: GDP is not handicapped by increases in debt; however our most important assets - our children and our environment - have their capital accounts drawn down each time we pursue unsustainable consumption. I want to say to them that we are profoundly sorry and that we ask their forgiveness. It may not be possible to repair the damage that has been done, but we should do our best to try.

I would like to ask everyone, including all citizens from accountants to zookeepers, our business leaders, the PGA Tour, and my fellow politicians around the world, for their understanding. What's most important now is that our population has the time, fortitude, and safe environment we will need for personal and cultural healing.

After much soul searching, I have decided to advocate an indefinite break from professional economic growth. We need to focus our attention on being better husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, and people in general. We should gradually but quickly change our goals from profits to resilience.

I am especially grateful for all those who show compassion, foresight and resolve during this difficult period and the years ahead. The path ahead will require new institutions, new goals and much sacrifice. It's time our culture starts enjoying the rainbow instead of continually chasing the pot of gold. This is something that will take all of us to accomplish - it will not happen if you wait for your government to fix it.

I think it is easier for one person to change their own course than an entire culture, but for an entire culture to change it has to start, somewhere, with one person. Personally I think many people are looking for this public recognition. Stop dancing around the truth with half measures meant to regain our former (declining) trajectory. Bring out the honesty cannons, and let's get a true accounting of our assets in natural resource terms, change our goals, and set our course accordingly. And so it turns out that Tiger Woods, once an icon of our culture, actually represents the worst type of example of how human raw materials given opportunities and cultural approval can overshoot to something decidedly and unexpectedly disappointing.

Next week I will post an essay titled "The Neuroscience of Sustainability", suggesting that irrespective of the supply side changes we make to our extraction based economy, the real war/battle for sustainability will be fought on the neuroscience/demand side - will our society be able to switch its goals and activities to ones more aligned with our benign/cooperative neural heritage (like oxytocin and serotonin) and deemphasizes activities with high dopamine and testosterone feedbacks. In retrospect we can probably guess what a typical Tiger Woods neural cocktail might look like.

Tiger is toast - he waited until his bad behavior reached a point where he had no choice. I am hoping our culture won't follow the same path. The main point of this post is that things we consider sacred cows (or Tigers) are under the surface anything but - and the negative feedback loops necessary to stop/slow errant behavior are naturally located well beyond the point of easy remediation.

CAMPFIRE QUESTIONS

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What can world leaders say/do that would appeal to different aspects of our personalities than selfishness, greed and individualism? (i.e. How could powerdown be conveyed as a positive message?)

Do new trajectories *only* follow 'bad news'?

Are we (in aggregate) ready for change that involves sacrifice, or just change that has no costs?

Further thoughts and analysis welcomed...

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

- Margaret Mead



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