

## CONUNDRUM

("a confusing and difficult problem or question")

We are in the middle of a crisis. The crisis is survival of our species. If not a dilemma, what then? The word is 'conundrum.'

For the last ten, twenty, and more years, western countries, led by the U.S., have promoted "globalization." We have given the World Trade Organization extra-national powers (even the U.N. does not have those without a vote and other bureaucratic maneuvers). The WTO can order a country to allow a company to operate within their borders, if that company can offer bargains for less than companies native to that country (although, which corporation is native anywhere any more?). That, of course, is not how it is worded; I suspect that I would not understand the words, but I've read that that is indeed what the WTO can do. As I understand it, globalization creates a global market place, and thus, more buyers.

A free market is a 'holy' idea to some people. Let the people fight it out. They will choose whatever products are the best, or--in today's world--the cheapest. Then whoever produces the best or the cheapest wins and forces their competitors off the market. That has come to mean that whoever has the biggest clout (in politics, or in the Media), the loudest mouth, the most money to pay for advertising, wins. Corporations merge, buy each other, in order to become bigger, and stronger in a global free market.

I suspect that this free market idea is based on our western ideas about Nature. We think of nature as a jungle where everybody fights for the right to exist, only the fittest survive. We interpret the "fittest" to be the strongest, most ruthless, most predator-like. But that is a wrong picture of Nature. Predators cannot exist without prey. If predators killed just for the fun of it (as we do), they would not eat tomorrow. Studies have shown that all predators usually eat only the old and weak of their prey, and not more than they can eat to fill their stomachs. There is a balance in nature; very far from our idea of a free market. In our western world, we have, for centuries, eradicated predators (wolves, bears, etc.). With the result that even in outlying suburbs deer have become serious pests: without predators to keep their number in check, deer and other grazers multiply out of balance. When we found ways to eradicate the species that kept our human species in balance (large predators, and microbes, bacteria), human population exploded.

Economic globalization is a fact of today's world. I am not sure that outsourcing was part of the grand idea of a global free market, but that too is now a fact. When people in other countries can answer bothersome customers over the phone, or via the internet, for \$10 a day instead of \$10 an hour, it obviously pays to outsource that service. It does not, in my experience at least, make that service more efficient.

Today, "service" no longer means service, but it is just one more aspect of corporate business. Just reaching service now requires passing numerous barriers, passing gates. If I am patient enough to struggle through ten minutes of an electronic menu with seemingly endless sub-menus, I might, perhaps, sometimes reach a real person. The other day, I finally got through to a person, speaking English, of course, but an English that I found hard to understand. I found it embarrassing to ask that person why (for example) my electric bill is so high, when what I pay to keep a few light bulbs and a refrigerator's going, converted in her country's currency, may be her monthly salary. (Of course it was not about my electric bill, that is just an example). I asked the nice lady, who had helped me well, whether she was in India. There was a pause, then she said, first shyly but quickly recovering a firm tone of voice: "we are not allowed to address that issue."

Then there is another kind of globalization that has covered the globe long before the free market globalization. There probably isn't a country where American films are not shown, in theaters, on video or DVD, with or without dubbing or even foreign language sync.

In every big city around the world there is a Hilton, or a hotel of another American chain. Our fast food companies have franchise abroad; Starbuck's coffee houses are everywhere. **The face of our affluence.** The world has come to know Americans as beautiful (mostly white) people, radiantly young, with perfect, glaringly white teeth, on the screen or in person. We, as a country, are so rich that our youth can and does travel the world. Everywhere we go we flash our wealth.

And, yes, Americans are generous and have a wide open smile. Our visitors as well as our franchises probably help many people in many countries live better, earn more, eat well--for the first time in history perhaps.

Most (many) people who have seen an American movie think that is how we look and how we live: huge houses, enormous cars, elaborate parties, monstrous refrigerators, machines that do the dishes, wash clothes and dry them. Our houses are widely spaced with lawns, kept like golf greens by self-propelling machines.

Telephone answerers, say in India, may now earn ten times what they could earn before (although, it is still ten times less than what we would have to pay people in America to do the same job). They are exploding into a new middle class. Of course they want what we so generously showed them we have. They too want big cars, or at least a car. Maybe not a four bedroom, two baths house, but a better apartment. They too want to travel abroad.

The second half of the twentieth century saw young people (mostly white) swarm all over the globe, finding "the best surf spot" in the breakers of the most out of the way islands. The surfers may not consider themselves rich, but they can afford to fly all over the globe, with a surfboard that costs many hundreds of dollars, clothes that cost another many hundreds of dollars--but to islanders whose annual income (in money) may be a hundred dollars a year, these young (and not so young) people are richer than anyone ever imagined one could be.

Very few out-of-the-way islands did not have surfers who showed off the wealth of the West.

And, the 20th century was also the time of the greatest population dislocation in known history: millions of people fled oppressive regimes, escaped from genocide, or moved to cities where they hoped to find a better life. What they found, more often than not, was the worst slums imaginable. Today one half of the world's population of six and a half billion people lives in cities. Monster cities.

The second half of the twentieth century also, inevitably, saw an enormous increase in pollutions of all kinds. Global Warming, we whispered then; Climate Change we say now.

So, at the same time, great dislocations and movements of very poor people, and the flaunting of western wealth to the corners of the earth.

Is it any wonder that many people, all over the world, want what we have?

But nor everyone. Suddenly we learn that there are in fact many people who have a very different reaction to our lifestyle. For instance in Muslim countries, but not only there, it is shocking to see women in shorts, with their belly buttons showing, heavily made up, obviously wanting to show off their sexual appeal. In some Muslim countries (by no means all) women cannot show their face, only the eyes.

I have heard an American woman proclaim proudly that she was a new, liberated person, and she could and would dress as she damn well pleased. "If only to show those poor veiled woman what a 'real woman' is."

I asked, and what is a heavily veiled woman walking on the streets of your city showing you?

She looked at me with scorn: "She is not showing me anything, I pity her."

Maybe the veiled woman pities you, I said.

Bali is a small island in Indonesia that has an ancient culture--in contrast to most of Indonesia, the Balinese culture is Hindu-Buddhist (as all of neighboring Java was, before the introduction of Islam). Today Bali is a favorite "destination" for tourists, mostly western, from America, but also from Germany, Ireland, Spain, Australia. The Balinese were able to adapt their culture, and the practice of their religion, to this invasion of people. Originally, as all indigenous people, they had regular ceremonies, often dances. One of these is the enactment of an ancient story, in which the men of the village fight a witch, to protect the village for another moon. When tourists first came, they saw a spectacle, which they, of course, had to capture on film. They jumped in between the dancers to get close-ups, so disturbing the trance the men were in. The dance was interrupted--the villagers shook their head: this meant a period of bad luck, maybe a bad earth quake, or an epidemic, because the men had been prevented to protect the village. But the Balinese learned to separate their practice and, a new concept, "entertainment." Now they perform some of these dances as entertainment for the tourists, but they also continue to practice dances as ceremonies, in their own space, their own time.

There is a difference between a ceremony and entertainment. The Balinese learned to separate these two activities. Most other indigenous peoples were not able to do that. Westerners everywhere were intolerant of "native customs." In Hawai'i, for instance, the language, the dance and other functions were forbidden for more than half a century. Only late in the second half of the last century were these restrictions lifted, but not until several generations had passed. Now there is a renaissance of sorts: the Hawaiian language has been re-established as a spoken and written language, dances are performed--but usually with an audience (of tourists). The Hawaiian "culture" is remembered in books (most of them written by non-Hawaiians) and parts of it have been adopted by the Tourist bureau, but it is not alive among the people any longer. The people essentially have lost their identity, their religion, their values, and are living in a vague in-between, between partially remembered song and wisdom, and the crude materialism of western so-called culture.

That is a worldwide story. Everywhere westerners have settled, or even visited on a regular basis, cultures and languages have been swept away. People are living in a void, sometimes clinging to a few shreds of the old and never quite fitting in the western way of life.

So, now we are in the 21st century. Many people, all over the world, having seen the riches of the West rubbed in their faces, so to speak, want what we have. At the same time, native cultures, customs, languages, almost everywhere have been destroyed or absorbed into a modern world culture that has as its main values the ownership of things, and fierce competition.

Very few, if any, native cultures were competitive. **Competition is not sustainable; cooperation is.**

Most, if not all, native cultures were earth centered. The modern world culture, if it can be called that, is ownership centered. We value things, owning things, owning resources, owning the earth itself--often expressed as "I can damn well do with this land I own what I will."

Is it even possible to imagine a sustainable world for six and a half (or eight, or nine) billion people? (In America a billion is a thousand million). Many, perhaps most of these billions have seen pictures of the frivolous riches of the richest nations the planet has ever known. Is it surprising that they want what we have? But could the planet support six and a half billion Americans, in the life style we now think our "right?"

I see this as a conundrum, an almost impossible knot of conflicting forces. It is also an ethical problem. We, the rich, loudly preach democracy (although we're careful not to explain what we mean by that term). I'm almost certain that to most people in the world "democracy" is not so much a system of government, but to be modern, to have the cars and

gadgets westerners have in such abundance. Can the world support six and a half, or eight, or nine billion people who would live as we in the west live?

If we are honest, we must admit that not all Americans live as the movies portray us. We have a few million homeless people in our midst, and the number of people who cannot afford health insurance is rising. Incomes for the average American is not going up much, for many it is going down. I once saw a statistic that indicated that what half of Americans throw away, could easily feed the other half, and a few million others as well. While we complain that gas now costs \$3 a gallon, in most of Europe it is considerably more than double that. And outside of Europe not everyone has a car, let alone an SUV.

Maybe a free market does not worry about the poor here, or anywhere. But can democracy exist in a world, or even a country, with a few super rich people and crowds of poor? The answer is, *No*.

Can our planet support six, seven, eight billion people at the level we consider "normal?" *No*.

Scientists who study ecological systems know that ecologies that are unbalanced (too many of one species, too few of another) is unstable. Chances are it will collapse. That is why it seems to me our so-called civilization is becoming dangerously unstable: the gap between haves and have-nots is too great.

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We, in the United States, think of ourselves as the greatest Democracy, a model for the world (although we are ruled by one party! One party controls all three branches of government. I haven't heard much talk about that, but, is that democracy? We used to have another word for a one-party government...

We've had all these wonderful gadgets, and money to travel, to live well, dress well, have our teeth fixed, hair newly grown, our fertility restored for maybe two generations. Now, the other 95% of the world's people want some of that also. Too bad that just when everyone in the world wants what we have, we are beginning to realize that our high flying exuberance may be unsustainable.

I have wondered why it is that we could have all that stuff. I don't know the because. Is it because we were smarter than other people, or because we were more ruthless? Did the gods smile on us and not on other people? Even within this country there are enormous gaps between not only the wealth but the well-being of different ethnic groups. I have wondered what in our system made it possible for one man to become the richest man on earth in not even half a life time? Only a little thought makes it obvious that when the price of gasoline for cars goes up, the price of airplane fuel must go up also. So, airlines must raise their fares. But in order to survive, they must compete with other airlines, and keep their prices down. Perhaps the airlines add seats to the plane, skip meals; already they don't circulated fresh air from outside, because it uses fuel to heat cold air; it is cheaper to recirculate the air they started the flight with. Anybody who has flown on flights of more than a few hours knows that everybody's bugs get mixed up and served over and over. And even so, airlines record million, billion dollar losses. Who ends up paying the losses?

If we are serious about saving our species, we have to DO something. The easy answer is, always, YOU do something. But if we, the U.S., are really the model for the world, shouldn't we be the example? Shouldn't we, as a nation, decide to drastically reduce our needless and wasteful consumption? Shouldn't we drastically reduce our use of polluting energy producing plants? Shouldn't we? Instead of squeaking tiny adjustments to the price of gas, we could add more taxes (to pay off our enormous debts), by making the price of gas \$10 a gallon. The demand for gas-guzzling SUVs would drop through the floor, and we would hastily import the little cars they drive in the rest of the world. Perhaps we would even drive less, fly less.

Of course, I know, and you know, that is not happening, and it is not going to happen. We, the people, would not go for it. For one thing because we have never learned to think globally, even though we are eager to talk globalization. We have never been able to really accept that we are not unique. Can we accept that we share this planet with six-plus billion other humans, who have their own histories, their own faiths, their own ideas of the future, and their own burning needs. We are only a small minority of all humans (less than 4.5% if I did the calculation right). The other ninety-five percent are not resources, to be used as cheap labor, they are people just like us. (Shocking thought!)

I can hear you say: *all this is much too complicated; I can't comprehend it. Someone else figure it out...*

***But meanwhile Climate Change continues. Hurricanes get hotter, summers drier, the level of the ocean is rising, while almost all major cities of the world are at current ocean level. Let our children worry, right?***

robert wolff, 2006