

PTSD NATION

Rules of writing state that the writer must tell the essence of what the writing is about in the first paragraph. The title says it all.

Daily I come across facts and figures that make no sense to me. For instance, nobody seems to question that our government didn't hesitate to heap mounds of cash on the big banks when they needed to be rescued because they were too big to fail we were told— their failure would collapse the global economy— so, we had to save the world. Yet, obviously it was never equally urgent to rescue 'we the people' who, after all, experienced the collapse of our economy more, and more immediately. In some countries employers reduced the work week, in order not to have to lay off people. In this country that thought never came up. Here companies lay off workers and have fewer workers work more hours (needless to say, at the same salary). And when we the people cannot find jobs, a shameful percentage of us are actually hungry.

When fewer people work fewer people earn, those who work earn less, the States will immediately experience a drop of income to pay for a budget made last year. States cannot spend more than is coming in, although the federal government can print money and borrow trillions. States must cut expenses more and more severely, as the economic meltdown makes more destitute people but the banks are making enormous profits which they spread among their top executives in the form of multi-million dollar bonuses.

Why is it that when States have to cut spending they even consider economizing on education? That seems to me the last thing one would want to cut. Here in Hawai'i we now have three three-day weekends in most months, teachers are on involuntary 'furlough', a cut of 17% in their income. California economizes on higher education and on prisons, mental health programs, and so on. What else could State governments do, they ask? They could tax the rich, but that is not possible in the United States because that sounds too much like socialism, a word that in this country means communism, Stalin, maybe Hitler, anything and everything bad, unmentionable. Or, a State could cut every State employee's salary by 5%, or whatever the percentage might be. But they cannot even think that way: cuts always have to come from those who can least afford the cut.

And the banks that were too big to fail are getting even bigger by buying up small banks that did not get bailed out by the federal government. But I don't hear a howl of protest from we the people. The official statistics are 10% unemployment, but for black men between 18 and 35 it is well over 50%. If anybody worries about that, my guess is that our response is more police and other units to control the masses. Our kind of capitalism requires that all government functions are to be transferred to private companies. Privatization of government functions.

Once in place, this system is very difficult to undo as we are experiencing now with the valiant efforts of a new president to 'reform' our immensely expensive and shamefully ineffective health care system, which actually is not a 'healthcare' system, but focused more and more on high end, very high tech, medical procedures that require the latest in machines and high end medical personnel and therefore are very expensive. Health care is free, walk-in clinics in every neighborhood that catch disease and conditions before they grow into expensive emergencies. But what we call the health insurance, drug companies, medical supplies 'lobbies' have bought probably the majority of our elected representatives so that it is almost certain that whatever eventually happens to the president's initiative will not be much of an improvement to what we have now. In fact, I am afraid, it will make things worse, if for no other reason than that whatever reform is agreed upon won't go into effect until three or four years from now. That means, of course, that all the for profit corporations that are now making 20% profit will have a few years to make 30% and more profit. All polls have shown that a majority of Americans, a majority of doctors and nurses, want a single payer, government run, real health care system. That has never even been seriously discussed. Our kind of capitalism is all-powerful.

One would expect a growing voice from we the people, but we the people accept.

The housing bubble, which is supposed to have been what triggered the economic meltdown was certainly not of our making. Here in Hawai'i planeloads of investors from mainland America came to buy land, sell it a few months later for twice what they paid, then buy and sell again. Many, perhaps most of those gamblers made millions but they didn't stay here. The few wealthy people who live here came some time ago to escape the burden of fame and riches.

And then there are the wars we are told we have to fight. It costs a million dollars a year to support one soldier in Afghanistan. A president who received the Nobel prize for peace is sending at least 30,000 more troops there, although even generals agree that overwhelming armies do not necessarily 'win' against guerilla fighters, now called insurgents. All I can think of is that wars make a lot of money for the military-industrial complex that a long ago president warned us about.

And while all this and more is twisting our human world out of shape, the planet is warming, climate change is already effecting the poorest people all over the world.

What all these facts have in common is that they show a frightening asymmetry. A few powerful people who do things that have an enormous impact on a great number of people. The new word for the kind of wars we, and a few others, fight is asymmetrical warfare, the overwhelming force of modern weaponry against oppressed people, poor people, unarmed people. The endless wars of America against 'terror' whatever that means. The Chinese war against Tibet, against the Uyghurs. The Balkan wars a few years back. Almost all the wars America fought after World War II (Grenada comes to mind). Israel's war against Gaza, against the Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and in Jeruzalem, the holy city of at least three (related) religions. Asymmetrical warfare is extremely costly in what we cynically call *collateral damage*: it kills a shocking number of obviously unarmed civilians, women and children.

Sociologists long ago found that an asymmetrical society is unstable. The greater the difference between rich and poor, the greater the instability. The United States now has an asymmetry between the very, very rich and the rest of the population that is unique in the history of mankind.

Modern man a few thousand years ago imagined himself apart and above Nature. We control nature. Natural laws do not concern us, we make our own. And so we have neglected learning from nature the laws of ecologies. The planetary ecology is the system that steadies the biosphere, the thin layer of air, water, and soil around the planet in which all Life exists. The first and foremost principle of ecology is that ecologies are wholes (not a summation of parts) in which every part is related to every other part. Ecology is our word for the way all life forms and the soil and the weather together make a whole that continually balances in order to *be*, to survive. The more varied an ecology the more stable. The simpler an ecology the more fragile. The ecology of Easter Island could collapse because it was a small ecology; islands have more fragile ecologies than continents. In our hubris we are attacking, rapidly reducing, the immeasurably rich variety of the planetary ecology. Each and every day a number of species disappears from this earth, either because we have destroyed its habitat, or radically disturbed the balance of a local ecology.

As I am writing there is a United Nations sponsored two week meeting in Copenhagen attended by leaders and representatives of 196 nations that is meant to produce a binding agreement among all nations to at least slow down the damage we, humans, are doing to the planetary ecology, and to help all humankind deal with the inevitable changes that are the consequences of our human folly, thinking we can control nature asymmetrically. Climate Change is already felt in all the world, even as apparently half of all Americans is denying there is anything going on. Another "only in America" (I have a long list). It looks now that there will be no meaningful agreement because of the overwhelming power of the few corporations who are the de facto owners, and so, rulers of the world. If the planet will indeed change as all scientists are now saying, the very poor will be eradicated first, but without the poor, the very rich cannot survive either. Will that be the story of homo sapiens (wise man), or, as we now like to call ourselves, homo sapiens sapiens, the species that is aware of being aware? One single species that was able to change a planetary ecology so radically that they eradicated themselves. Yes, that too is evolution.

Asymmetry is nothing new; I learned about it almost seventy years ago. The Germans in World War II let it be known that if in any town even *one* German officer was killed, in retaliation they would kill all the men and boys over twelve. And so they did. I am so old that I lived in the Netherlands when the Germans bombed Rotterdam from the air, May 1940. I was there, I saw the planes, saw the fires that burned for two weeks and destroyed the city. That bombardment ended what resistance a small Dutch army managed to show the German war machine. Being occupied by an army for five years is an experience that one does not forget. After those five years I felt that I had lost important young man years. I was still a teenager, full of vim and vigor in 1940, and a full grown man five years later, not much vim and vigor left after what is now known as that last "Hunger Winter." All of us threw ourselves into starting over, repairing, rebuilding, which helped to push back what memories hid deep in our heads, or wherever it is that we store memories. We did not know yet that there are experiences one cannot forget. I buried myself in a university (the Germans had closed all universities as 'centers of rebellion', insurgents we would say now) after the war got a degree in psychology in a few months over three years, a six year program. Finally allowed to go to America, on condition that I stay only as long as I was registered at a university. I married, got a second degree, left the country, two years later came back. Eventually became a U.S. citizen, had a job, then a career, did well. My family grew up surfing.

Many years after the war, suddenly, literally out of the blue, five years of suppressed anger, anxiety, agony exploded in my head in one hour of the greatest agony I think I ever suffered. For quite some time I remembered and relived every incident, every accident, every narrow escape, again and again and again. That was my PTSD — 'post-traumatic stress disorder,' although then it did not have a name yet. Now I know each one of my scars, I live with them. I accept that I never recovered. Disorder? Yeah, what else to call it. Not a disease, not a condition, not a wound. It is a scrambling of the brain. A person grows up with a set of ideas, beliefs, realities that come from parents, neighbors, teachers, books, other kids (not in that order). The American Dream. And then, without much if any preparation, you find yourself in a world where none of the old values, ways of being, expectations, what you think of yourself and others — none of those exist any more. You lose sight of what is up, what is down, what is good or bad. A disorientation not perhaps of time and space, but of values, of expectations, of an idea of what humans are, What I am.

My experience of being a civilian in a land occupied by an enemy army must be very different from the experience of being the occupying army. But the disorientation, confusion, the sudden confrontation with death, blood, mutilation, undreamed-of violence, must be similar. I don't know what it feels like to kick open a door, storm into a house, armed, finger on the trigger, to find the family — women, children, perhaps men — cowering against the wall, terrified. But I do know that at least some of the young men bursting into that house pick up the panic, the terror of the civilians. Humans cannot help but feel the agony of other humans.

When I look back (and I don't like to do that) I wonder whether it would have helped me to talk about what I had gone through, what I had done, what I had not done, what I had experienced, narrow escapes, friends, family, loved ones killed. Maybe. I don't know. I do know that the scars will be with me until I die. PTSD changes our deepest soul.

I've thought much about who we, humans, are. What we are. I think about violence in a world that seems to be getting more violent every year. I do not accept that violence is in our genes, in our DNA, because I have known people, cultures, where our kind of deliberate, planned violence was unknown and unthinkable. I've known people on small islands, in isolated villages, in groups, who were absolutely in harmony, peaceful. *They would not have survived otherwise.* Those societies usually were small, and egalitarian. There was never one person who had more, was more powerful, more wealthy, more anything than anyone else. Everything was shared. Not just food, meat, shelter, but also emotions, feelings. The death of a child was mourned by all. A man lost at

sea was buried in effigy with all the ritual of the tribe. Harmonious cultures are peaceful because nobody strives to be different, to have more, to be more than another. Harmony is symmetrical.

Asymmetry is its opposite, it breeds uncertainty, confusion, which breeds violence.

Soldiers must be trained to kill fellow humans. Yes, I know that anger, frustration, even fighting is in nature. But there is a difference between the emotion of anger and torture as a technique, a science. There is a very important difference between the accidental death of people whose house burns down, and the death of people whose house is deliberately hit by a bomb dropped from a drone piloted by a man at a desk 10,000 miles away. I have known a few men who got used to killing; years later they killed themselves. There is a difference between defense, a war against an aggressor nation, and fighting wars for control of a resource. Sometimes I have the horrible thought that the wars we are fighting now are for money. I cannot help but know that most, perhaps all the wars of the last thirty or more years have been more and more asymmetrical. An enormous machine of overwhelmingly superior and lethal armaments against people who do not wear uniforms, let alone bulletproof vests; night-viewing goggles, bulletproof iron against barefoot boys. Collateral damage out of all proportion to the number of armed casualties. And the latest in medical technology to 'repair' bodies that on the other side of an asymmetrical war will die.

We assume that a larger number of million-dollar-a-year-soldiers should be able to defeat the Taliban. But 'the Taliban' are not a nation, they are not even an army, they are more often than not the people we claim to protect from the Taliban. As I heard someone say, "Yesterday a farmer, today Taliban, tomorrow a farmer." So why do we continue to think utterly asymmetrical? What is it we want in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in the hundred countries where we have hundreds of bases?

They, the big They, tell us we must make war far away to prevent the bad people from attacking us here. Meanwhile we here at home are bleeding with a broken health system, jobless with no expectation of much change in the next five years. The big They spend our wealth and the wealth of our children and grandchildren on wars and on banks, as we go hungry and more of us become homeless. If that is not asymmetrical, I don't know what is.

And asymmetry does not work, not in Nature, and not in any human society.

When I look around me, talk with neighbors, people on the street, I find people who seem asleep, in denial, until a word or a gesture suddenly breaks through and she bursts out in tears, he yells and screams. Their tension inside is often hidden, but I know the symptoms: PTSD. The so-called Baby Boom people grew up in one world and now find themselves in a strange, alien world where peace means war, women have equal rights but do not own their own bodies. A world where we elected a 'black' president (he is only half black, everyone forgets his mother) who was going to bring change, but continues most of the contrary ideas of the previous president. My sons grew up on the beach, eating healthy food, now see the beaches fouled, eating packaged artificial food. The State is broke, but the government prints more money to fight wars, plural. What happened? We did not realize that all those free credit cards that were almost forced on us were bait. Nobody warned us that a mortgage with a 'variable rate' is a fraud. For years we were told that we were rich, the richest country in the world. Our cars got bigger and bigger, our roads deteriorated. Now jobs are few and far between.

Post traumatic stress = the after effects of the stresses of a sudden shift in the world we grew up in. Disoriented, north is now south, we're not rich any more, it takes two jobs to pay a mortgage that once was considered modest.

Regardless of asymmetrical wars, asymmetrical thinking, whatever we are or do, 'at the end of the day' as the current saying goes, we humans are still part of the planetary ecology. We think ourselves superior because we can control and therefore own this planet, dig up and destroy the planet if we want. But now the planet is talking back. The planet is telling us in no uncertain terms that our polluting the air, water and soil of this planet is causing the planet to heat up. The rich and

powerful say, *Oh, nothing to make a fuss about, only a few degrees: recovering our bloated economy is more important.* The planetary ecology is like an organism, a few degrees is a fever; a few more is lethal.

That million dollars per soldier per year comes out of the education of my grandchildren, and they are the future. Is it more important for my government to build up the infrastructure of one of the poorest and most disorganized countries in the world than to repair and restructure our own infrastructure? Where are the million green jobs we were promised? Where is the money to repair bridges that have been neglected for thirty years? Lopsided, *the emphAsis is on the wrong syllAble.* Strange twists in our doing and thinking. All the billions, trillions, we have already spent on wars in Iraq and Afghanistan did not go to those countries, most of that money came right back to the pockets of a few corporations here. Wealth redistribution it is called, from we the people to a greedy few. Isn't the truth, the real reality of today, that we the people are being squeezed to fatten the billionaires flying around in their private planes? Is that what democracy means, the democracy we are trying forcefully to convince others to have as well? Why do we need embassies that are the modern version of mediaeval fortresses? We don't trust anyone any more. We've forgotten that it is easy to make enemies but not any more difficult to make friends, and much more fruitful.

From my isolated little outpost of the planet what we, humans, do and have become, looks sick, a very contagious ill that makes us act against our better judgment. A cancer: uncontrolled growth, eating our host, the planet.

I think we all suffer from PTSD. Think of the disruption we have seen in the last ten, twenty, maybe thirty years: supposedly a 'growing' economy but our incomes did not grow. Are our roads, bridges, airports maintained as they should have been? How about truly affordable homes? Do we really need to eat manufactured food that has not only too much sugar, salt and fat, but a 400-word list of chemicals added for taste, shelf life, preservation, and who knows what else? We are being lived by the ever flatter, larger, and higher definition TV giving 8 second sound bites. Education now is passing tests; teachers rewarded for students' scores on multiple choice horrors. Our humanity pummeled, forced into artificial molds. Our creativity, our colorful and uniquely different ways to adapt to local ecologies flattened to consumption, waste, and a globalization that means free markets and rapidly spreading poverty. We are lied to by the rich and powerful, the 'owners' of the planet. Herded into refugee camps, fed by what there is a surplus of, labeled "from the American people." In fact a very insufficient nutrient for growing children. There are more of us and most of us live lives of pure misery. Maybe one in ten of us have a wasteful life style unimaginable even a generation ago. We have made the planet so asymmetrical that it is no longer the same planet. We are no longer the same people. We are twisted out of shape without having adjusted to being herded into voiceless masses. We've suffered stresses that we cannot name, traumas ("deeply distressing or disturbing experiences") that we cannot understand nor forget.

PTSD nation — if not PTSD world.

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