

asymmetry

For many years I have pondered the growing asymmetry in our world. I've never used the word 'pondered' before, it is a ponderous word and I don't feel ponderous. But perhaps it is the right word to describe a kind of thinking that is more of a tuning in, somewhere in the back of my mind, to what is beginning to have a word. It is still not easy to focus, it has so many facets, so many manifestations. I think of it now as *asymmetry*, everything out of proportion with many faces, different forms.

Today it is easy to learn what is going on almost everywhere on the globe. Official 'news' is for an American public that is not much interested in what makes news beyond our borders. Fortunately the internet opens (almost) all the rest of the world up, in as much detail as one seeks.

Asymmetrical wars have become the face of war. Enormously disproportionate power of attackers against virtually unarmed attacked. Huge air power, money, equipment, against civilians and a few 'insurgents' as we call resisters now. Undeclared wars (illegal according to our own Constitution and international law) in two or three or four (we don't even know how many) countries. Overarmed police with the most modern weapons, usually more than one. against unarmed non-violent activists. Prison terms immensely out of proportion to the seriousness of the crime, leading inevitably to 'detainees' who have no rights whatsoever, have not been tried, let alone accused, after being tortured must be hidden presumably for the rest of their life.

Banks that juggle imaginary 'instruments' with super-inflated values gambled into never before dreamed fortunes with nine and more zeroes. Winning in one year more than was spent in fifty years by all the rich countries for development assistance to poor countries. Is that still winning, or theft? We at the bottom know very well that the billions, trillions, were stolen from us. Our government has spent so much rescuing the banks that there is nothing left for the fifteen million unemployed. The banks sit on their zeroes, hoarding the wealth of the millions of homes that were taken out from under us. The three richest men in the world owning more than the forty-nine poorest countries together. Truly obscene differences between the incomes of the richest and the poorest in this country and many others. A financial collapse clearly the work of a few out of control banks who get bailed out for trillions of borrowed dollars and then have the best year in their entire history.

All but two States of the fifty United States on the brink of unsurmountable debts that they are not allowed to have, by law. They must reduce services like schools, libraries, emergency medical care, close prisons, reduce the number of fire fighters, raise the tuition of universities by 300%...

The country that pays twice as much per person on so-called *health care* is rated below the WHO 'health' ratings of 16 other countries — all of them with considerably less wealth per person if an average, or even median, wealth were computed.

The nation that thinks itself the richest and most powerful nation on earth whipped into a permanent hysterical fear of 'terror'. A nation whose only response to any threat is the full force of its considerable armies in the air, on land, and in the dark. An ever more bizarre security search of people, their clothes and their luggage at airports—even for 20 minute flights..

Unable to think about consequences of the mere presence of a hundred thousand armed troops at the other end of the world in a country whose languages we do not speak. We tell each other that we are there to win the hearts and minds of the people while our Supreme Court declared that even just talking to anyone labeled by someone 'terrorist' is a felony. Can we imagine what we would feel, or do, if Afghan troops had checkpoints in our cities, kicked house doors in at 3 AM to search our homes for weapons, all too often randomly shooting, killing women, children... But of course that is unimaginable. The latest plans are to sweep away a vaguely defined Movement so that then a clean Afghan government will take over as a healthy democratic state. We, their saviors, forever friends. The American Dream.

Domestic violence, violence against women, seems to be increasing everywhere. Everyone must know about the war against women in the Congo, but now and then there are news items

about violence against women in Brazil, and other countries in South America.

So-called modern agriculture, modern meat production, food made in factories, more examples of a crazy overdoing of common sense, human ethics, health. And it would not take long to add a hundred other asymmetries.

The wars, the increasing violence of armed-to-the-teeth police; the 'Bubble' that led to a planet-wide financial meltdown, an immense sucking up of wealth to the top; the severe over-medication and reliance on exotic machinery of modern medicine; the ecological disasters caused by our frantic greed for resources plundered from the earth — all utterly out of proportion to attainment, solution, consequence, healing.

A remarkable aspect of all that is that few people see asymmetry as a problem. Not too difficult to find out that the CEO makes 200, 400, 600 times as much as the secretary in the pool or the worker in his factory. Does it bother anyone? The various wars that we are conducting are always presented as necessary for our national security; rarely questioned. Hardly ever any reporting from the point of view of 'the other side.' We know how many American brave soldiers were killed but we were told many years ago that 'we don't count enemy dead'. Clever psychology: it seeps into our subconscious that civilian dead could have been, must have been, enemy anyway.

That the minority party, a minority of Senators representing mostly small States, 30% of all Americans, can block and stop any and all actions of Congress is difficult to understand. How can that be? Apparently there is nothing the president or the administration can do about it. A Supreme Court that consistently votes 5 to 4 decisions that are extreme, to say the least. For instance, corporations are *persons*, and article One of the Constitution guarantees free speech, interpreted to mean freedom to spend unlimited amounts of money to support a human person of their choice in any election. From down here it seems obvious that corporations, most or all of them international, are really running this country and probably many others as well.

But perhaps it has always been like this. The pyramids were built, it is said, by slaves 4000 years ago. There were empires in Africa, South and East Asia, South and Central America, a thousand years ago. The American war of eradication of the land and people of a continent was waged a few hundred years ago. A hundred years ago most of the world's now countries were colonies of a few European nations and America. The history we learn is asymmetrical. Modern humankind probably believes that greed, lust, arrogance, violence, and the other Cardinal Sins, are the norm; *be happy don't worry*.

No, it wasn't always like that. Historians record battles and disasters, newsworthy events, but most of humankind spends its days searching for food, water, shelter; for most of historical time in small groups scattered over what land could support a group of people. In order to survive we had to help each other, cooperate. We would not have survived if we had lived with the kind of asymmetries we have now.

By inference that means, I think, that the current worldwide asymmetries, getting more asymmetrical all the time, spell the end of, or at least a major catastrophe for, humankind and considerable changes for the planet we think of as our exclusive property.

Of course very few individuals orchestrate, practice and promote, the kind of unlimited capitalism that drives all modern asymmetries. But those few have become so powerful that they not only own but run the economies of the world, and so, run governments. Resistance, insurgency and its violence, is a response to what is felt as oppression. When the few feel threatened they respond to the response with the overwhelming utterly asymmetrical power they wield. Force always and inevitably begets counterforce and today a little force begets overwhelming super force. That strengthens resistance. And that leads to black hole practices, torture, no-law detainees, eternal prisons and always more force. The logic of force-counterforce requires 'they started it.' Who started what can of course be put anywhere, any date, any battle, any action, at any yesterday.

The Cold War was a never fought battle of perceived threat and counter-threat. We think we

won it, when the other collapsed after putting all its eggs in one basket: more and more military spending. The enemy in the Cold War drowned in its debt. Now we are doing the exact same thing even though the threats and perceived threats are not another powerful nation, but very few individuals who have a grudge, an idea. Nevertheless we attack them with all the might of our planes, drones, Marines, Special Forces, mercenary armies, sixteen different secret services. We not only strengthen but give huge worldwide importance to a few individuals who have ideas and a fraction of our power and money. We choose this enormous asymmetry.

Or could it be that our Military/Industrial Complex needs wars to make money?

Sociologists who have studied societies with extreme inequalities of wealth tell us that asymmetry does not work, it makes for an unstable society. Sooner or later the people rebel. Americans it seems have a greater tolerance for extreme inequality than, for instance, western Europeans even though the American revolution preceded the French revolution by a few years. Marie Antoinette said 'let them eat cakes;' recently a woman who may well be elected to the Senate declared that the 15 million now destitute unemployed Americans are 'spoiled and do not want to work'.

Ecologists tell us that ecologies constantly adjust asymmetries; asymmetry disturbs, destroys the dynamic balance. An ecology in which one species has acquired the power to eradicate all its enemies (except the tiniest ones we cannot see with our eyes) and then uses that power to severely reduce biodiversity *cannot be*. That ecology crashes.

Is there a who or what behind all this? Or, how could this have happened, that is the question I have asked myself for the past at least forty years. My experiences with non-western peoples is not unique, the majority of humans is not western. I grew up in two worlds, speaking two very different languages, being aware even as a young boy that I had to communicate with people of the two worlds differently. Not only different words, but different thinking, different values. All children growing up in a bilingual two culture world learn that early. The world of my parents was difficult to understand because it was abstract, in pictures, a life style that obviously did not fit the smells and temperatures of where we were, with commands and values (good/bad) that did not make much sense. The world of the people of the little town and in school—at our house 'in the back'—was easier to understand because it was all around in the trees and animals, in the sounds and smell of people who knew themselves a part of all Life, all Nature. Closely related, integrated in, the world of rain and sun, things that grew and lived, that I could feel and touch. It was more comfortable because I was accepted for what I was. In contrast, my parents groomed me to be someone they imagined. Being accepted without expectations was a relief.

The world of my parents was somewhere very far away, came to us after a four-week boat voyage, knowable only from books. Things from that world were imported at great cost. My mother was concerned that I was becoming *too native*. She sent me away to her world when I was eleven. What a shock! I failed in school although until then I had skipped two classes because I have a high IQ, whatever that means. I came back more native than before. She sent me away again after I finished high school, landing in the Netherlands two weeks before the start of WWII. In S.E.Asia we had not known much about what was happening in Europe.

I've been a nomad ever since. After a while I have the urge to move on. I'm very good at making a new home, making new friends, often creating a new me, always making a very alive garden, also always getting rid of a lot of stuff. I've lived in many countries in all continents except Australia, and the Antarctic if that is a continent.

Everywhere I was attracted to simple. People at the bottom of the heap, the poor, a minority, the indigenous, and, if they were to be found, First People (aborigines). Over the years I learned that the great majority of all humans live on the edges or even outside the elaborate human structures we have created to rule each other. Every government has a way of getting to the top and labyrinthine bureaucracies; we do not see the ones outside. A generation ago law enforcers

stood on street corners to remind us that there were rules. Today's law enforcers often initiate action rather than wait for crimes to be committed.

My father had a saying, 'Everyone regulates her/his own breathing'. I learned that *most of the time most of the people regulate their own behavior*. I have seen that it works just fine without any form or kind of 'governing'. The chaos that is Nature works because trees, plants, animals, relate to each other making a balanced dynamic whole. When we knew ourselves part of that whole, we related to trees, plants, animals, as family. Long before we invented governments, even before we imagined bosses, we lived in small groups working together, helping each other. That is the nature of human nature. My guess is that criminal behavior is learned, as killing other humans must be learned. Left to ourselves in the real world WE survived.

For some time now we have left the real world to find ourselves on our own, thinking ME. Life became about winning. Some win, very few win big, most of us lose. Asymmetry followed our divorce from nature. The root asymmetry is the impact of our ability to imagine what never was. We can invent and we can lie. Once we fantasized ourselves separate from the real world we spun ever more ethereal virtual webs that calcified into brittle human-made structures. Our much vaunted minds came up with *owning*, a concept never before known, an unthinkable idea in the real world. What hubris to think we can *own* Mother Earth.

In evolution, even non-physical evolution, one thing leads to another. The imagination that we could own begat hierarchies, some humans better than others, leading to a strange new idea: leaders. A succession of tyrants led to a multitude of styles of government born of ideas about how we ought to live, prosper, grow, increase — survival of the species was never included in our pipe dreams. Owning land, the ultimate unnatural, made nations with arbitrary borders. Helping each other became barter, then trade, and so, money. We spun civilizations out of ambition and thin air. Now we're locked into illusionary illusions within illusions. We busy ourselves patching up and adding to the flimsy structures we think are "the world" and killing each other for an infinity of imagined causes. Anything real, like an oil-spewing volcano on an ocean floor, is an irritating reminder that there is a real world underneath our man-made one. We don't want to be reminded that polar caps and glaciers are melting. The economy, fighting terror, scheming dreams to get rich, are more important than having to worry about things we want to keep background noise. The real world, however, is talking back at our plunder. We may think it is background noise, but in truth the noise is us.

So now there are a few of us who take owning the earth to its logical end: experiments trying to cool a warming planet. Geo-engineering. I've heard from three people in different parts of the world. that secretly technologies and chemicals are being tried on live cities with live people— who, of course are not told.

Of those who can read this, the literate, most say there must be hope. We're running the planet, aren't we? Somehow, someone, some time, will figure out how to stop bad things from happening so that we (at most 5% of the almost 7 billion of us) can go on living in the style we're now accustomed to (as before, on the backs of the rest of all fellow-humans). Free to do whatever; never worry about food, home, energy, the future, or ... asymmetry.

Homo Sapiens, whose imagining enabled lying (and flying), whose thoughtless rush ignoring consequences upset all balances, its swollen forebrain tipping the scales.

robert wolff, 19 july 2010

I'm inspired by the novel about the recent capitalist near death experience, by Sophie Gherardi, titled *Péchés Capitaux (Capital Sins)*, © October 2009 — of course it also has a whole sentence subtitle so that the cover tells what the book is about. Yes, it is in French; hard to imagine it has not already been translated. It is a novel, as the author explains, to make the bizarre, absurd, dark concoctions of the Big Banks almost understandable. To give each episode its chapter, each person some flesh. I learned, for instance, that probably almost all bankers all over the world had no idea what they were buying from banks and selling, for a fee, to investors.