



Greta, Gaia and The Mink

by Glen Birbeck

I awoke from a dream state, as I often do, retaining a couple of dreamy images. A mulligan stew of ideas in my mind had begun to form a story. Its elements were from the news. The millions of Mink in Denmark being killed. The young environmental activist, Greta Thunberg being ignored. An essay in the NYT about civilization collapse, how and why. The firing of Michael Kuperberg, executive director of the U.S. Global Climate Change Research Program. The concept of Gaia, the Earth's biosphere as a single organism. And last, but never least, Covid.

How are all these elements connected? What story do they inform?

The mink first. These cute animals, raised by the millions to make garments, caught Covid from humans. It swept through their ranks quickly. Being farmed in crowded conditions, they are to this virus like stacked, dry, cord wood is to fire. The cold logic of epidemiology says they must all be destroyed. This is because the virus mutated as it swept through the mink. It then jumped back to humans. The risk that a mutant strain might be more virulent to us is too great.

Greta Thunberg is a young Swede known for her environmental activism. She organized a world wide "student strike for the environment." Vladimir Putin, the Russian, was patronizing...Saying, she just didn't understand the complexities. The media always mention that Greta has Asperger syndrome and Selective mutism. This possibly to explain her activism. Her insistence that the environment is in crisis. A crisis caused by human civilization. Trump was patronizing to her as well. The Christian bible says a child shall lead them...into a peaceable kingdom. It doesn't say "they" will follow, or even listen.

Then there is Gaia, the Earth, the huge organism we humans are only a tiny part of. We have an immune system reacting to Covid virus, Earth too has ways of dealing with irritants. Gaia regulates the oxygen level in the atmosphere with fire and regulates the population of animal species with viruses. Crowding and overpopulating, spewing poison into Gaia's lungs are, for her, an irritant. For a billion plus years Gaia has regulated life with viruses, she still does.

Then there is civilization and its history of collapse. It has happened many times. Collapse, like war, is a major theme in history. What causes it? Are we now facing that event too? Complexity is the double edged sword in human civilization, in both its rise and fall. Bring lots of people into cities from the farms and you need supply chains. Field to table was a couple hundred feet in the beginning. For us it's grown to many thousand miles. Supply chains are simple at first but grow longer and more involved as civilization grows. The house of cards analogy fits here. Oh, we're good. Our engineering is impressive. Human ingenuity pushes the house higher and higher. The cards rest solidly atop each other, up and up...until it all crashes down. A breeze, a bump, a virus. Our engineered tower falls. It wasn't designed for the final insult, that ace dealt from the bottom of the deck.

Nature has many cards up her sleeve. It's her game. By her rules. What's the story? Something by Don DeLillo maybe. He wrote the novel, "White Noise". His style would fit the elements and crazy arc this "civilization" seems to be following.

Can I extract anything other than a comic dystopian novel from these elements? No, the setup is like a 50 ton locomotive on greased tracks going down hill at 50 MPH toward a cement wall. Add to that an engineer in the cab distracted by his cell phone, updating his Facebook page. This loco driver is putting the pedal to the metal, increasing the speed. And why not? It's too late for the brakes.

You demand a happy ending? OK, Gaia is better off, healthier, without eight billion humans!

Equality

by Joe Steinberger

The English gentleman and scholar Thomas Robert Malthus taught that the mass of mankind must constantly be thinned by starvation. Those who have plenty to eat are the superior people, those who don't, a surplus.

In fact, we humans have proved very able to support ourselves on this planet. With the work we have done and the technology we have developed there is plenty of food to go around. Indeed we are producing too much stuff - tearing beautiful things up and belching toxic gasses. It is not the poor who are doing this. It is the affluent.

Meanwhile, many people are living in dire want - hungry, without shelter, and without six square feet of this earth to lie down on.

Perhaps there are too many people on the planet, but there are surely six square feet for everyone. We cannot blame global poverty on overpopulation. A thousand years ago there were many times fewer people in the world, but mass poverty was the norm - under the boot of the few who owned all the resources. The problem is not that there is not enough food and other stuff to go around, but that it is so unevenly distributed - was then and is now.

Our American rise began with free land for the landless, and our independent democracy grew out of the widespread success of those settlers. We have not had any problem feeding ourselves, although our population has grown considerably.

Equality is at the core of our American experience and of our system of beliefs. Our belief in equality, the core principle in our Declaration of Independence, is an ideal, however, that has not always been put into practice. We denied the equality of our African slaves and their descendants, we denied the vote to the landless, and to women, and even today, while the great majority of our population are recognized in law as equals, the reality is often otherwise.

Our continuing challenge is to put equality into practice. This creates an apparent dilemma: if we are free, we are sure to have varying fortunes. We must understand that the ideal of equality is about equality of opportunity, equality of worth as people, equality of respect and consideration. It does not mean an equal division of the goods of this earth. What it requires is a just division, based on our preferences and our efforts, kindly sharing what justly belongs to us all, and leaving no one destitute.

Giving up freedom is sometimes proposed as the way to create economic equality. We have seen, however, that governments which leave no room for individual economic initiative have all been failures. Freedom for enterprise is essential for the material - and spiritual - wellbeing of mankind.

Social justice and freedom, including economic freedom, are not competing values, they are necessary partners. People must be free to provide for themselves so that they can provide for their families and contribute to the commonweal.

This does not mean that we can expect social justice in a lawless *laissez-faire* capitalist economy. It means that we cannot have a successful economy without leaving plenty of room for individual initiative, and it means that for that economy to benefit the community there must be rules to insure a just distribution of the proceeds. My freedom to own you as my slave would conflict with your freedom, your freedom to poison my drinking water would conflict with my freedom. We must have rules that protect our community, and ensure fairness.

Indeed, unfairness, in the form of the development of a privileged overclass and a oppressed underclass, is the natural tendency of a free-enterprise democracy. That is not a condemnation, but an appreciation of a tendency that must be countered with other forces. Government must supply those forces in the form of tax and spending policy, anti-trust laws, environmental protection, and other provision of law and order in the public interest.

Today in the U.S. we are finding it hard to see this essential connection between social justice and individual freedom, because of the debilitating left-right political divide that turns yin and yang, government and freedom, into a one or the other choice. Let's put wisdom over partisanship, and succeed together.

To move forward as equals we must work with determination and mutual respect to construct and maintain an effective combination of government regulation and freedom for individual initiative.





WEEK THIRTY-FIVE

COVID-19 RANDOM NOTES WHILE SHELTERING IN PLACE
by Phyllis Merriam

Crow breakfast was a meaty chicken carcass Broken Wing brought her brood to completely devour in less time than I took for my first cup of coffee. Voraciously yours, they caw.

I can breathe again. America will have a return to sanity in the White House.

The first female person-of-color vice president is a hugely historic event. Kamala Harris will be the highest-ranking female in American history. I predict she will be the first female president.

Washington is referred to as "The father of our country." I've been thinking that President-elect Biden will serve America like a kindly competent grandfather. I'm very fond of grandfathers, having had a wonderful one myself. I remember tuning in to C-Span when Biden was Obama's Vice President and watching him, as President of the Senate, administering the oath of office to senators. I was so impressed. Each senator, no matter their party affiliation, and their guests, received equally personal, warm and enthusiastic greetings from Biden, who has a long history of working across the aisle.

Trump will remain The Tweeter-in-Chief even though he has suffered a huge narcissistic injury by losing re-election.

The political polling industry should just slink away in embarrassment. I think Punxsutawney Phil, the groundhog that supposedly foretells spring's arrival, would be a more accurate predictor of American election outcomes.

The weekend arrived with unseasonably warm weather that motivated me to finishing seasonal yard work. The pansies are still blooming, so I brought them into the house to see if they'll winter-over.

A middle-aged couple jogs along, side-by-side. The man is running barefoot on the cold, hard asphalt. Other joggers have given up shorts for long pants. More people out and about are wearing facemasks in compliance with the governor's latest covid order.

I frequently see an elderly gentleman out and about town in his candy apple red motorized cart. He always has an American flag waving off the back of his vehicle.

Veterans Day (Armistice Day) arrived on a mild foggy day with covid restrictions.

Considering all the sacrifices American veterans gave and give their country, I find it remarkable that so many American civilians balk at the small sacrifice of wearing a mask to protect their fellow men and women and themselves. The Commander in Chief of our armed services has not been a role model for this small sacrifice to fight a world war against an invisible enemy.

Moratoriums: Rockland's go to plan

by Steve Carroll

Good leaders plan ahead to steer away from potential pitfalls. Rockland's leaders are not so good at planning and often find themselves stuck in situations too late to avoid. Their favorite "go to" plan over the last few years has been to place a temporary "moratorium" until they can figure out just how to get themselves out of the mess they find themselves in.

The word "moratorium" comes from the latin {moratorius} meaning {tending to delay}. It is commonly defined as a "temporary suspension of an activity or law until future consideration warrants lifting the suspension."

Over the past few years Rockland has placed or attempted to place moratoriums on (short term rentals), (marijuana stores) (cell phone towers), (group homes), (gas plants) and most recently (downtown demolitions). This of course in response to a proposed demolition of a prominent downtown commercial building. This repeated action to kick the can down the road, i find frustrating, unprofessional and all too often leads to legal action.

Two new council members will be seated next week and I would encourage this new team to become more pro-active and less re-active as we plunge forward into 2021. Two items that seem to be gaining favor are establishing the position of City Planner and returning to an in-house attorney This could be accomplished by placing a moratorium on department hiring.

Our assistant code officer recently took a position in Camden and two police officers were fired. This means the City is short three positions maybe even four depending upon the investigation currently going on in the police department So this might be a good time to rethink the need for overnight bog patrols and do we really need another code officer telling us all the things we can't do.

A City Planner could give us a fresh look at a positive new future for Rockland and give us ideas on what we can do instead of telling us what we can't. 2020 has been a difficult year and it seems we stumble forward to an uncertain future. As the new year approaches lets make a plan and chart our path knowing where we are headed. Congratulations to the newly elected councilors. We're depending on you and the other members of councilor to lead us forward.



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