



New Year's Snow, above inversion . . .
On the road in the American Northwest.

HIGH-TECH / NO-TECH

The simplest and most powerful of all possible tests is the test of doing without.

As far as I can see, there is only one way to understand the relationship between myself and the technology upon which I depend: do without it for awhile. In the quiet interval in which the machines are turned off, I can observe both what they give, and what they take away, both how they empower, and how they disempower.

I think of this as a kind of high-tech fasting. This is fasting in a very much more general sense than we usually think of it. It is fasting in the spirit of asking a question: What will happen if I stop doing this? In questions of diet, for example, it is easy to see how this works. What will happen if I stop eating overly salty or fatty foods? I simply stop eating these, and within a week or two, my body comes back with an answer.

With technology like cellphones and wireless laptops, this fasting works in essentially the same way. I stop using them for an extended period of time and see what happens. Leaving the problem of the potentially harmful constant immersion in electromagnetic fields of varying strengths aside, what is interesting about these digital tools is not just how they work in and of themselves, but also the fact that they are now connected to an unprecedented non-stop world-wide web of potential distraction. Now that the Internet and the Web are for many people "always on," even when on the move, the problem of the mind wandering off to read and send messages or news reports, watch videos, etc., has become nearly universal. In other words, the contemporary mind, whereas it has been tremendously amplified

in its creative power by all these new technologies, has at the same time become a mind which is essentially in a permanent state of distraction.

It's interesting I think that the sound of the word "distraction" itself reveals that it is closely related to other states of psychological concern like "disturb," or "fracture." We have in the Latin root of distraction two parts, *dis* = "apart" + *trahere* = "draw or drag." So the image is one of one's being being dragged apart, as it were, like the two horses of a chariot taking off in different directions. But what precisely is being drawn apart? In the most basic sense, it is my awareness or my attention. Attention we might think of here, following Krishnamurti, as an unforced state of mind which is unique for this very reason of being undivided, and is altogether different from mere concentration, which always has something forced about it because of a division of some kind.

I discovered for myself something about the nature of distraction some time ago in my troubled relationship with telephones. For me, the problem is straight forward: I don't like them. I noticed that I not want to be interrupted, especially not at random intervals, and even more especially interrupted by sharp, loud, sounds of any kind. So I got rid of phones in my life. Already twenty years before the introduction of the now-dominant cellphone. The question everyone must ask themselves now is: which is more important, a kind of background which encourages a calm, steady, focused state of awareness, or one which is constantly connected to random bursts of mostly non-relevant, i.e., disturbing information.

The more subtle and less obvious aspect of this problem is that, as I like to say to friends, if you think you can be interrupted, you already are. In other words, at a deeper level of our psyche—the part of us, say, that will without the slightest bit of training sit straight up in the tent with a shock of fear upon hearing a bear walking around a camp in the middle of the night—this deeper level of the psyche constantly monitors in a wonderfully unconscious way the potential for disturbance. It

does this evidently so we can give our attention to other, more important matters. So my theory is that we are by immersing ourselves in this chaotic sea of potential hi-tech interruptions overloading this inner circuitry to the point of abuse and near break down or collapse. In other words, just the mere possibility of interruption is simply still more interruption in a yet more insidious, subtle form. Such thoughts do a lot more mischief at deeper levels of the psyche— both public and private—than I think we realize or are willing to admit.

Let me illustrate this idea with a little anecdote. One of my passions is teaching, especially the performance of classical music. Well, once not that long ago, I was working with a string quartet made up of North American young people. The cellist was late to the rehearsal. She then walked in, sat down, and even before tuning up, put her cellphone on the floor in front of her. I was new to this, so I thought I would not say a word and simply observe how things progressed from there. The first thing I noticed is how the three other slightly younger musicians were magically drawn into this contemporary digital object of desire. They could not keep their eyes off of it. Now meaning, especially musical meaning, is a mysterious thing. What the cellphone-as-hip-consumer-artifact did and does is in a way not just disrupt or break apart the focus of the rehearsal space; it totally usurps meaning and attention. I could before my very eyes see this wonderful élan vital that great music gives young people go straight down a dark, dank hole into some demonic high-tech abyss.

So, the two great dangers of high-tech distraction in the view being sketched here are: First, this break up of awareness to the point that it cannot focus creatively on much of anything. And second, as people become more aware of the first tendency, there is a real danger that they will simply react mechanically without understanding and reject all new technology. My feeling is that we are already seeing a radical increase of both.

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Snowy Sagebrush Steppe, last light, just before New Year's snowstorm . . .
On the road in the American Northwest.

ON THE FRAGMENTATION OF NATURAL WATER CYCLES

*The spring gives freely of its water,
but only in freedom can we drink.*

Let me begin by saying that I don't really know first hand what a truly large-scale natural water cycle is like, because I have never lived for a sustained period of time in a culture wholly nested within one. At the same time, I do know and have extensive experience with what a natural water cycle is not. And let it be said from the outset, that I do not like what I see, both in the parts of the European Alps that I know well, and those areas of the Northwest that I am presently exploring.

I do not like this recurrent pattern of the radical fragmentation of natural water cycles: break the flow; dam the river; fill the reservoir; divert vast quantities of water for frequently questionable, wasteful ends. Perhaps most importantly, I simply do not like the folly of attempting to control what is not really understood. The rich and chaotic complexity of the natural water cycle has been treated as if it were as neat and orderly and precise as a Swiss train. And now, only some fifty years after the great boom time of mega-dams, everywhere the negative side-effects of the extraordinary hubris of this philosophy of control are building up before our eyes like piles of unpaid bills.

The facts are unequivocal. In the Reuss / Rhein watershed of the Alps, where I've worked for many years intensively, the salmon stopped running in 1958; And now, by some very strange twist of fate, the part of the great Columbia watershed in which I'm now focusing much of my attention—the South Wallawas—the salmon also stopped running that same year: 1958. Those are facts.

But in a far more subtle and tragic way, some vast, essentially

unknowable, natural movement has been lost; it has stopped turning, as it were, as if a heavy wrench were thrown into the delicate spokes of a finely tuned wheel.

So the movement of the cycle fragments, breaks up into essentially out-of-phase, partial, disharmonious, smaller half-cycles.

The result is that the entire life-community that depends on this rhythmic flow of a watershed as a whole begins to suffer—one species at a time—begins to pull back, decline, dry up, and, finally, vanish. “Vanish” is not, I believe, an exaggeration here. In both areas mentioned above—the central Alps and the South Wallowas—there are at present no real recovery plans for salmon, which means that they are effectively being erased from consciousness.

How has this happened? Well, I would say because of confused meaning.

The basic question is, “*What is a river?*” Is it something like a vein or artery of the living Earth? Or is a river more like a sewer or water pipe, with precise, measureable properties? These questions of meaning and perspective are more basic than the facts of objective needs, like water for irrigation, power generation or human consumption, as important as these might be. Why? First, because natural limit always trumps need. If water managers say they need for a town of 5,000 two million liters of water a day, and the basin provides only one million, well, the “needs” will just have to change. Full stop. Second, it is meaning that shapes this all-important perception of natural limit, just as meaning in turn is shaped by a culture’s primary formative images or metaphors. If we think of water as money, for example, then it is clearly a waste of capital to let water just flow out to sea without making it work for us. So, just like money, we put water in “banks,” by building reservoirs and dams. And, just as with money, we act as if there is no natural limit: more is always better. The crucial flaw, I would argue, in this water-is-money style of thinking—its essential contradiction—is that there’s no compound interest when it comes to water, nothing like the money-begetting-more-money of for example a 5% loan that hedges against doubling its cash in a mere 16 years, and that essentially out of thin air! Water behind

a dam, it is true, does build up for a time, but its quality rapidly degenerates, and the knotting up of the natural flow evidently invariably sets off a cascade of contradictions throughout the wider water-based web of life. The water silts up; water temperatures rise as vital oxygen levels decrease; the thermal weight of such large bodies of static water may set-off a micro-climate forcing, raising ambient temperatures enough to melt snowpack on the higher peaks before that snowmelt is needed, or cause more precipitation to fall as rain instead of snow; agricultural pollution is no longer periodically flushed out from the system; the complex nested rhythms and dynamic balances of the ebb and flood of the water-year are broken; the macro flows of essential nutrients from mountain forest to the sea and back again are destroyed. These are just a few of the facts, not in my view as it is euphemistically put, “concern,” but rather of collapse. Contradiction—or how the all-important limits of Nature and the artifacts of Culture ‘speak or fight against one another’—has two key features: First, it points to weaknesses in our way of thinking, or philosophy of design, which are at the same time happily always new opportunities for discovery; And second, contradictions are always non-sustainable. That is, opposing movements grind against each other until the wheels of the system at some point simply fall off.

This means that, regardless of how we think about them, where there is contradiction there will be collapse. It is up to us—and this is the problem’s ethical dimension I think—to use the best of our science to untie the knots, so to speak, in an intelligent and measured way, or else be swept away in a highly unpleasant flood of mostly unforeseen negative consequences.

ON THE NECESSITY OF ROADLESS AREAS (II)

It is true: once a road is built, it frequently becomes easier and easier to get to places that are less and less worth going to. If it can be said that roads have a tendency to bring out the worst in people—the noisy grind of greed and self-centered haste—then paths bring out the best, a kind of waste-not-want-not of a rugged, but increasingly rare spirit of self-reliance. The one, a

sharp-edged knife that rips apart the fabric of forest and meadow;
the other, a single thread which in the walking weaves itself
seamlessly back into the natural world.

Clearly, we obviously need good, well-designed roads. But even
more we need the wisdom of natural limits which tells us when
not to build them.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS MANDALA

A ritual circle which brings the far away, the very small, the
ignored or half forgotten, into the magical middle realm of the
contemplative compassionate eye.

A circle which not just mirrors the Beautiful, but reflects also
the Strange and Ugly through the clear, yet necessarily imperfect
and somewhat blurred lens of partial truth.

TOO MANY VARIABLES

We shape the world and the world shapes us.

To master the complex, keep things simple.
To keep things simple, keep the number of variables
to but a single dial.

Turned all the way down, the dial produces the sleep of rigid
dogma; turned all the way up, it produces the runaway confusion
of random noise.

Better to keep things focused on the
clear limits of the middle way.

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Powder River, graceful meanders, near Keating . . .
On the road in the American Northwest.

ON THE LITERAL MAN & THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF METAPHOR

The world of the literal man is a world of extreme fragmentation.

In this broken-apart world of the literal man, the natural weave of the interdependencies of wholeness has been ripped apart, and 'facts' and 'things' exist in all but complete isolation.

It is a world, therefore, in which the *this-is-like-that* of analogy and metaphor not only makes little sense, but is no longer even possible. And it is a world, because nothing is felt as being connected to anything else, ethical responsibility has been reduced to the exigencies of hard cash and personal survival.

It comes as little surprise that the literal man makes the perfect foot soldier in the technological armies of mechanistic science, the same science that has given us the modern weapons industry. Here we find the literal man in the form of the brilliant physicist who without the slightest ethical qualms diligently increases the yields of each new nuclear device; Or the literal man in the form of the virtuoso economist who spins the market trends with great short-term success and mathematical élan, while completely ignoring every single relevant feature and consequence of the wider, long-term context; Or the literal man of the genetic engineer of genius who cleverly creates seeds that self-destruct, seeds that you must now forever buy because they terminate in their own infertility.

The final extreme? A world resource empire that hordes the very water of life itself, and then sells it back to us at a price only he, the literal man, can afford. This is the "participate or perish" world of the literal man. It is a world in which morality has been reduced to the tightest of circles around 'the me.' It is a state of mind and being which now, sadly, manifests in Western culture in both genders about equally.

COMPLICATION?

Complication—in contrast to the richness of natural complexity—is about making things at least twice as difficult as necessary, thereby making it easy to do really difficult things—not at all.

BETWEEN THE WORLDS

All mischief begins with distance. *Poet, scientist, farmer, teacher*:—be the messenger between the worlds.

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Eagle Creek, cloud stream . . .

On the road in the American Northwest.

POLLUTION, WHOLENESS & THE PLASTIC BAG

In a way, it is possible to say that the pollution of the Earth, especially at the extraordinary and massive scale at which it is now taking place, is only possible because of a radical fragmentation of our thought and perception.

It's interesting that pollution is not an end in itself. In other words, pollution is not something we do deliberately, but is rather almost entirely a result of the unwanted side-effects of everyday actions and habits. Because pollution is not an end in itself, or goal, it is therefore very easy to, as the apt figure of speech has it, "put out of mind." In other words, we focus with laser-like precision on some goal, like making a computer, or powering a car, while ignoring the pollution factor or the ratio of kilograms of toxic waste which results from each kilo of product produced. Again, my contention is that this denial of such highly relevant facts is only possible with an equally highly fragmented manner of perception.

From the philosophical point of view, what's interesting about pollution, is that it does not simply go away because we for whatever reason avoid thinking about it. In fact, this is precisely why pollution is so revealing: it is because of the very wholeness of the natural systems of the Earth that pollution—like it or not—comes round as a kind of highly unflattering mirror of our own fragmented styles of thinking.

There is logical beauty in this because we have before us a clear reflection of where we have gone wrong. Pollution is telling us in its own way where mistakes in design need to be corrected. And as part of the natural system ourselves, this is indeed what we would do—that is, correct our mistakes—as long as there is nothing blocking us from doing so.

This is easy to test for yourself.

Consider this: it is a fact that plastic shopping bags are wrecking havoc with the water cycles of the world. For example, the area that has become known as The Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a vast surface whirlpool of plastic-based trash between the west coast of the United States and Hawaii and now covering an area the size of Texas, is full of these ubiquitous white items of convenience. Ugly, yes. Harmful, doubtless, I think all would agree. I would also argue that it is unethical, unethical in the most direct, straightforward way because the facts show clearly a failure to take into account the harmful wider-context consequences of our actions. This is especially so because white shopping bags are in no way necessities; they are merely a habit of convenience and could easily be replaced. Here, it would also be reasonable to suggest that, like all activities that are by consensus found to be harmful to the common good, the bags should naturally be prohibited, as is already the case in many places from China to San Francisco.

The sport of philosophers is to watch meaning change. Just as rooftops without gardens or banks of solar panels are beginning to look like a great opportunity lost, and vehicles which still have exhaust pipes are morphing into ill-designed instruments of mindless waste, artifacts like white plastic bags have for many already shifted in meaning from the once stalwart icon of clean consumer convenience to the needless foul filth of the world. All because of an idea, a new way of seeing, that happens to be true.

OUT OF TUNE

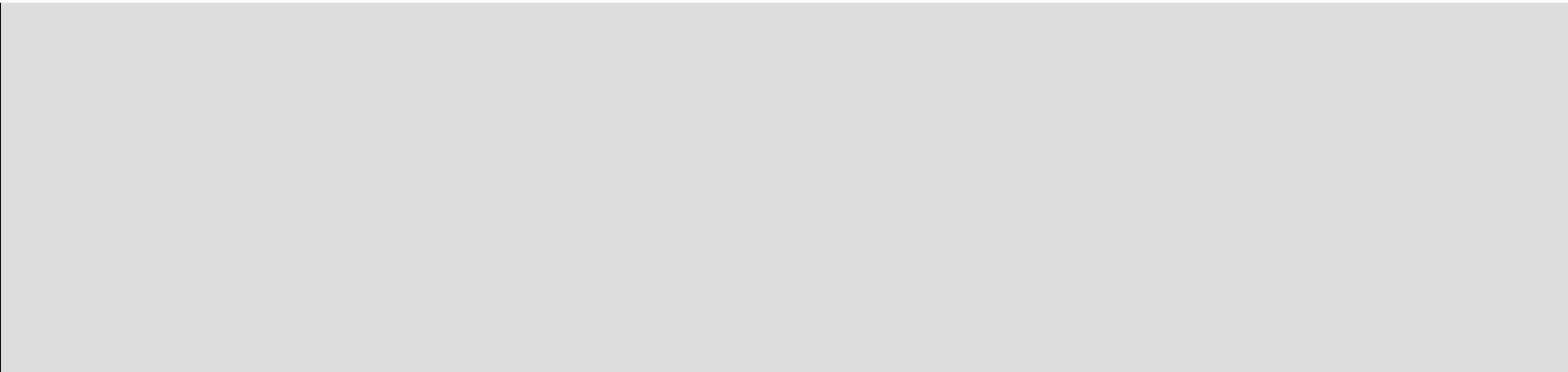
As the harmony between Nature and Culture, between Law and Convention, collapses into contradiction, there will be a parallel loss of the sensitivity of perception required to see the corruption. The result is a devil's loop of mutually reinforcing devolution and degeneration. This is dangerous because, once the downward spiral begins, it becomes increasingly difficult just to see it, let alone stop it.

Witness in the present era the loss of excellence in matters of musical culture. Here we see clearly that the inability to sing or play in tune goes hand in hand with the preference for louder and louder, and less and less subtle, sounds. Perhaps it could be said that the penultimate phase of degeneration is when we sing out of tune and no longer hear it. The last, is when we no longer care.

REAL THING

Real passion, real inspiration, cannot be imitated.
That is why we imitate them.

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The Columbia River below the Dalles Dam . . .
On the road in the American Northwest.

from **ON THE WAYSIDE—**
four new x-step (162-step) poems

*. . . Randomness repeated
does not look like Chance . . .*

BEER CAN

Five cents a piece is
what we the
people pay the man
with his garbage bag
full of cans, gathered along the
shoulder
of a noisy, filthy, awful
highway. For thirty
years, the cans have bought five cents
more of freedom, a sure, certain
insurance for the down and out.
From their cars, others
watch the man pick up his cans,
one by one, like metal mushrooms.
From the safe, fuel-injected time-
space of their speeding
vehicles, a faint voice comforts,
saying, "*this can't happen to me.*"

But who can say? Economies
blow-out much like tires:—

always at the peak
of their performance. Then *boom, bang,*
collapse. Hard times lie just outside
the locked doors. Ask the man with cans.
Five cents each, we pay.

SEARCH GOOGLE

It's always been so,
that the one
who controls water
controls the kingdom,
and the one who controls the flow,

the source,
of information controls thought.

But now, the dam at
Fort Dalles powers data about
data, a new kind of meta-
control, a thirst for power
that drinks rivers whole.

The Dalles, once natural meeting place,
now hub of North American

squalor, the perfect site to mine
data for quick cash.
Like water, data *flows*, can be
filtered, turned off, colored red, blue,
black, invisible. First we asked
the river to give

us cheap cans. Now we
ask the river to connect up
the thoughts of the world. Water, like
data, can be used for power.
Let's hope for the best.

DAM

It always begins
with a straight
line, a straight line drawn
at a distance, a
line of force, of control, of thought

slamming
straight into the order of things,

a potential that
is wasted, just spilling into
the sea, in thought, just spilling, a
tight, high, knot in the arteries

of the pulsing earth,

a knot now filling a vast lake,
filling a vast lake with pressure,
spinning turbines that are heard from
here to Alaska,
spinning turbines, power of thought,
of force, of control, from here to
Alaska, electric nights, big
city, nights without

stars, rivers without fish,
fish so thick a horse would not cross,
water so clear you could see stones
of bright gold dance on the bottom:—
O river of knots.

SLAM

It took Africa,
the pulse of
a whole continent,
to shake us alive
out of the trance of 2's & 3's

set in
harsh stone by Bach & Mozart. Yet

even Africa

could not stop the fall back into
the soft chairs of the bourgeoisie.
Great rebirth of rhythm, dammed from
day one by the so

dazzling flood of disco-dollars,
sounds that sell soap on radio,
the supermarket of TV.

Why is 4 so square?
Captains of industry that beat
their rock 'n roll drum in the time
of buy, buy, buy, hammers that pound,
flatten dead the soul.

Tune in mtv,
cheap cheeseburger of trash-sound! Born
to be wild in a cage wired shut
by the tyranny of 4:—Try
to be serious.

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*IX.27.2009,
Heather Camp,
Eagle Cap Wilderness*



Snake River Country, clearing after winter storm . . .
On the road in the American Northwest.

ON THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE *BRUTISH BRAIN & THE COMPASSIONATE MIND*

“You’re either with us, or against us.”

versus

*“Whatsoever you do unto the least among you,
you do unto me.”*

This is what I see as one of the signature divides of our time, between the brutish brain and the compassionate mind, two defining features of our species that are now profoundly at odds with each other.

On the one hand, we have the brutish brain, which embodies the deep and rich legacy of the human animal’s natural history, and has clearly evolved to meet and master the many demands of survival. It is not at all that different from the brain of a wolf, or a bear, or an ape. The powerful engine of the brutish brain is the mechanical intellect of problem solving. How to make a better stick for digging roots, a better skin for carrying water, a sharper stone for a more deadly weapon. Its means is force. Its ethics is essentially the ethics of the me, my group, or my nation. The identification of this smaller me with the larger group, which is then radically divided from the wider environment, is a key feature of the brutish brain. What’s good for me and my group is good; what’s good for my opponents is bad.

On the other hand, we have the evidently uniquely human compassionate mind. The compassionate mind sees itself in the other, sees itself mirrored everywhere in the world around it, and, like an infinitely large grand piano, its strings seem to resonate and reflect all the other sounds of the symphony of life played around it. The energy of the compassionate mind is not just the problem-solving, computer-

like ability of mechanical intellect, but rather intelligence. Intelligence is in this view a vastly more subtle movement of consciousness; it is this energy of intelligence which is evidently very much broader in scope and source than the isolated individual self. Its means or method is understanding. Its ethics is that of the good of the whole, the good of the widest context of which it is aware. Now, I think we could say that the brutish brain, if it is not limited in some way and simply left to run off on its own, is potentially the single most destructive creation of evolution. At the same time, the compassionate mind, as far as we can know, is evolution's most creative achievement. The problem, of course, is that we in a confused way embody both.

Clearly, the mind of compassion has come into being in part to limit the over the millennia ever-increasing lethal capabilities of the brutish brain, through understanding and insight, like a patient, loving mother checks the wayward tendencies of an overly aggressive, self-centered child.

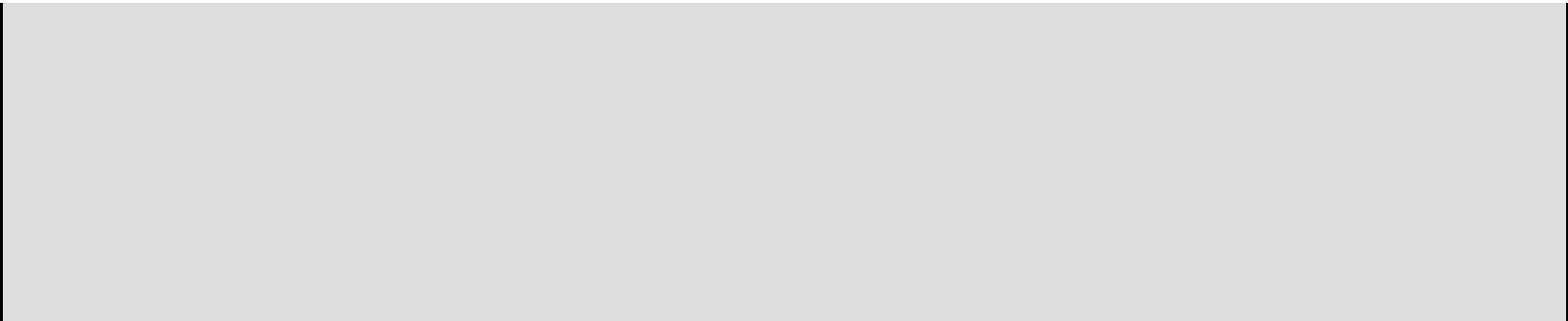
We are now at a kind of tipping point, or threshold, concerning the relationship of these two, either conflicting or complementary, movements of consciousness. By this I mean a point beyond which it will become increasingly difficult to change course. The fundamental question is down which path will we go, down which path will the energy of the world, of humanity, be led? Clearly, the brutish brain at present has tremendous mechanical power behind it. Its instruments are the corporate and military-industrial complex, and the financial and legal systems that have co-evolved to support, profit from, and protect these. Government at present, call it what you will—oligarchy, democracy, tyranny—serves overwhelmingly to safeguard these corporate and military interests. That is my view, and I stand by it. At the same time, the more enlightened democracies world-wide embody in a tragic way the very contradictory division of consciousness which is my theme. Freedom and civil rights are guaranteed. But only insofar as these do not get in the way of the more primary corporate and military interests.

This is why even potentially good leaders will be torn apart by the present systems of government. Because the worst half, so to speak, dominates. So leaders promise peace, but give us more war. They promise universal health care, but sell out to the insurance companies. They promise to address climate change, but give us more coal-fired and nuclear power plants. It is in a word why politics is at present the very worst place to look for leadership.

Unquestionably, the way of the brutish brain, if it should for whatever reason be allowed to prevail, will lead to its ultimate apotheosis of total self-destruction. This is self-evidently so, especially when considered over longer spans of cultural time like two or three centuries, because of the already realized destructive potential of its weaponry, or simply because of the rapacious waste of resources and resulting damage to the biosphere inherent not only in their possible use but solely in their development.

But the way of the compassionate mind, even though its voice is at present weak in the political arena, has the power of necessity behind it. And that will make all the difference. That is, if we see the difference with clarity, and with the energy our whole being.

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