

Or Maybe Not
by
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Some months ago, I wrote on the same note to myself three tidbits that, at the time, were seemingly unrelated: a quote from *The Christian Science Monitor*, a comment by an artist, and a summary from my reading of a particular story in a famous book. Recently, I figured out a possible reason for doing that. Let me explain.

Gaia Vince wrote “Nomad Century: How Climate Migration Will Reshape our World.” She was interviewed by Richard Horan in the September 5, 2022 edition of the *Monitor* (p. 43).

Horan asked, “Jared Diamond in ‘Collapse’ says that human civilization tends toward decay and disintegration. Do you agree?”

Vince responded, “I don’t necessarily agree with Mr. Diamond about that. Look at us. We are talking on this device communicating over thousands of miles. I did nothing to create this. I go shopping and can find and buy almost anything I desire. These are examples of cooperation, investments by people in science and technology. There are amazing structures in place that are the result of human cooperation. Ants and bees organize and cooperate and function quite efficiently, but they are all clones of one another. Humans are the only species that cooperates with complete strangers. That’s our greatest attribute.”

Is it not fair to say that Gaia Vince is optimistic, values cooperation, and sees possibilities in the ways in which we humans have been doing things up to this point in time?

Over forty years ago, Judy and I sat in the Julian, California home of artist James Hubbell, whose two sons attended Webb School. Hubbell was sharing the excitement he felt whenever coming across a structure built by humans that had come apart, its components spread across a debris field.

He saw the fallen building as bricks freed for re-use, to be re-fashioned into new forms. Whether he meant to or not, he prompted me to wonder whether societies are like this, constantly coming apart and re-integrating in new ways? Are we in such a moment? Are we always in such moments? We acknowledge the central truth of constant change but seldom live as though we really believe that.

In “The Second Coming,” Yeats declares that “things fall apart, the center cannot hold...” Is the physical law regarding entropy true for societies as well?

A friend with much experience in China urged me to read a book of stories, “A Call to Arms,” by Lu Xun. My friend said that Lu Xun and his writings are widely known in China.

About his life, Lu Xun wrote that those who are at the bottom of the social order learn what a society is really like. He chose to be a social outcast by not taking the classes he was expected to take. He became disillusioned about medicine as a field. He believed that literature could change the spirit, so he promoted a literature movement. But that did not get anywhere. He said, “if no one is listening, then comes loneliness.”

He took to mindless work copying inscriptions as something to do that seemed worthwhile but wasn’t. A friend challenged him, asserting that one cannot blot out hope because it belongs to the future. So, Lu Xun wrote stories which, he said, he did mainly to humor his friends.

“Madman’s Diary” is a story that conveys contempt for traditional values and thought. The story is easy to see as a revolutionary call to action. The story describes the cannibalistic nature of Chinese (read traditional) values which keep a shackled, fragmented community from working together for a better future.

In the end, the diarist in the story is assimilated back into the society/culture he critiques. “Madman’s Diary” ends with the words “save the children” because they are the only ones that have not been corrupted.

Lu Xun championed the individual and democracy in a culture with little history of championing the individual or promoting democracy. But there is little in the story to give the reader confidence that what happened to the diarist—assimilation back into the culture he critiques— will turn out any differently for the children. Lu Xun only hopes it will be so.

An optimist persuaded that the arc of history bends toward human cooperation to avoid decay; a societal critic who hopes things might be different one day but likely despairs of that happening; an artist who pays little attention to either of those points of view and builds interesting things out of stuff that used to be part of other interesting things. What relationship did they have in the back of my mind when I put these on the same piece of paper?

That my answer to each was “or maybe not.”

My friend has told me about hearing creation stories from various cultures. Crafting creation stories seems innate to humans. Knowing where one comes from is an urge that crosses religious and cultural lines, and thinking about these things is good exercise for our little gray cells.

He noted a creation story from India that goes through the various stages of creation, from the first spark to modern formations in a manner parallel to creation stories everywhere. That story ends, “Or maybe not.”

If you crave certainty, “or maybe not” is an unsatisfactory answer. If you are comfortable with the mystery of life, it might be the perfect answer.

Or maybe not.

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