

Texas Tea, Coin Flips, and What's Missing

Written by Alex Baer

Tuesday, 03 June 2014 22:03

Here is a story about the present and the future. It is a story about energy. Now, it is a story about fracking. And, not to repeat myself, it is a tale about unbridled madness. Later, the story could be about something else.

For now, there are plenty of deep and scarring errors in this saga, but no redemption -- maybe in time, but not right now. Right now, there is only an equally deep, dank, and abiding feeling the world is no longer under any obligation to make sense, that some elemental bargain has been voided, that some vital bank of dead man's switches has been locked out and they no longer work.

To quote the band Jethro Tull, from *Locomotive Breath*:

- *In the shuffling madness*
- *Of the locomotive breath...*
- *the train won't stop going*
- *No way to slow down.*

Our era is shuffling madness. Our locomotive breath is the unending hunger for energy, for fossil fuel. Imagine this era and its impossible hungers, and then imagine them slowing down. *The train won't stop going -- no way to slow down*

Of course, that train has been barrel-assing along for some time. The world -- its people and systems -- has been straining for a long time, trying to gain, and retain, even a micron of credibility and sense. This old world hasn't made sense for a while and it may not make sense ever again. Or...

Or, maybe, quick as a coin flip, a couple centuries of energetic insanity will be whisked away, leaving nearly endless energy, and endless possibilities, for humanity -- 100% sustainable

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energy, and virtually pollution-free. If you're going to go careening around off the walls, *imagine*
ering ar
ound, all over the place, you might as well imagine
big
.

The outcome of that magical coin flip will have to wait a bit. Right now, in this world, we are preoccupied with Other Matters. What we have right now is the insane squabbling over likely diminishing fossil fuels -- more is not being made by nature, you must admit -- with wars over water not that difficult to forecast.

Yes: To think about fracking is tough to take, all right. Carcinogenic chemical injections, horizontal drilling, spiked and poisoned water tables and aquifers, a growing occurrence of sinkholes and earthquakes under our homes...

And that's only what we *suspect* we know about this relatively new form of resource exploitation. What is missing from this initial picture may be even worse. You must also admit that no one expected Love Canal. Or Thalidomide. No one expected Bhopal. Or BP's runaway oil volcano in the Gulf of Mexico. Or Windscale, Chernobyl, Three Mile Island. Or Fukushima, the story still being dictated almost 3 years and 3 months later...

The things we don't expect tend to come true with alarming frequency -- alarming only if one is paying attention, is noticing what happens, is always braced for impact even when there is no imminent or apparent collision at hand.

A lot of What Happens Next is going to depend on whether we insist, as a species, on remaining willfully stupid -- something humans are incredibly good at -- or decide to startle ourselves and erratically branch off into Wisdom 101 for the first time.

Yes: The species could really stand to break our pattern, stop going Pro in dumbheadedness, stop majoring in bullheadedness, and specialize in something other than ignorance. You know: *Hold down the tall grass and make a path* here.

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Something to ponder: *Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.*

Those words are from the late Arthur C. Clarke, author, scientist, futurist, program host, undersea explorer, diving school proprietor, and goodness-knows-what-else, a man widely considered the father of satellite communications with ideas on such things stretching back to 1945. He also predicted cell phones, GPS systems, and the internet, among other currently popular technical delights.

I bring this up only to say that Arthur was no fool. He had a good head on his shoulders. He had an eye on the future and a foot in the Right Now. So, it may be helpful to consider his words when we ourselves start to poke around in the Big Bucket of What Happens Next.

Clarke may have become a model for many people, and for many generations -- a model that extolled and exalted, or at least inferred, Science could get us out of almost any scrape. And routinely *would*.

Philosophical hopefulness and playful arguments aside for the moment, you might keep *technical brilliance*

and

ocean exploration

linked as concepts, and parked in the medians, margins, and shoulders of your mind. On the road through life, we humans link up, and hitch rides on, the darndest things, and on the most tentative wisps you can imagine.

We are equal part horror show and idyllic daydream, and there's no telling which one of our hands Time will shake now and again -- the ones ushering out life with Zyklon B in extermination camps, or the ones ushering in life, in maternity wards. There's no telling which wisp of an idea may come to no good and much harm, and which frail connection may become the future's strongest and brightest bridge.

Imagine, too, what could happen if we could solve our energy needs and simply eliminate fossil fuels as a necessary evil. *Everything* changes. *Absolutely everything*. The trick is to have it happen without the razor-knifed drawbacks of various fanged genies -- without pollution, without climate change, without new cartels of cutthroat greed, without pipe dreams like nuclear power's

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meter
brain-wash...

clean-and-too-cheap-to-
eye- and

It's something worth imagining. First, though, we have *fracking* right in front of us, hunched over and lurking, straddling us, bearing down on us, between the here-and-now, and the off-and-later. It's a make-or-break era. The coin's already been flipped, slicing the air, tumbling in slow motion...

* * * * *

On an average day, I can spend a lot of time and energy getting worked up about the craziness that is very real in this world. I not only *can* do that, I *do* do that. It's a bad habit, one that I have to quit, before any more of the *cra*
zy
rubs off on me.

This decision has been sneaking up on me for some time now. I know this because I cannot read many news items, whether in hand or on line, before my left eye starts twitching involuntarily, tap dancing around that side of my face. It is one of my *tells* to the knowledgeable, that I am either weary and stressed out, or else holding one hell of a poker hand.

This habit I have, of paying close attention to the world I am inhabiting, is really rubbing me the wrong way, like a rental tux based on measurements taken 10 years ago. It's as binding as a wool sweater fresh out of the washer-dryer, downsized to a thimble-like cocoon. As humiliating and wonky as trying to run in swim fins.

If I were food, after a session of news-imbibing, I'd be lounging in the steam-table chafing dish, trying to not get anything chapped or chafed, or too badly burnt on the bottom while taking some healthful steam. Instead, I build up an unhealthy head of steam of my own, and threaten to emit a hot, moist blast at the dinner table.

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Fuming, sputtering, muttering, and bellowing were never on my to-do list as a consequence of trying to keep up with things, with current events.

(Brief aside: Alert readers hereabouts will be unsurprised to hear me apologize again to Dave Barry, and to suggest that *Fuming, Sputtering, Muttering, and Bellowing* would be a fine name for a law firm, especially one up to its eyebrows in any number of essential and volatile industries -- such as, I dunno, *moleskin alignment* and *muffin repair*, maybe. I have no earthly idea why those two came to me, but I am happy to blame my news habit, and the attended itch for humor relief, for that passage, too.)

Current events. □ Paying attention. □ Sounds harmless enough. □ Little did I know...

During one of those headaches that makes everything ripple, as if the environment is giving off waves of blast-furnace heat, or lethal radiation, I try to take that as my cue to slow down and take stock of things.

This happens after pitched battle, after getting through especially rugged, difficult-to-take news articles -- sessions that leave me white-knuckled and leaves my hand a fused, seamless part of the newspaper or mouse.

These are the times that I yearn to petition someone, somewhere, for reassignment to another species -- as a hummingbird, maybe, or an alpine yak, possibly. Anything that would allow a quick escape from my own humanity, or just be so damn large, aloof, and invulnerable as to cause all events to have to silently go around me, like hikers tip-toeing around snoozing grizzlies.

It may be one version of hell to read terrible, and terrifying, news. It's another order of hellish magnitude to later stumble across more information that *adds to* the terror of the initial account. Then, it one suddenly realizes that ignorance is not only bliss, it may be preferable, and necessary, for one's mental functioning.

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What is present and seen may be lunacy, but, to later discover that a large part was missing and is even worse... Well, technically, that is known as Not a Good Place to Be.

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Here is what I mean, and this will pop your mind like a pinched, overripe grape, just like it did mine: *Water catches fire*. This happens all over. You might be surprised how many places. It happened in Texas. In fact, it hasn't *stopped* happening. It happens all the time.

Yes, it's old news. Been going on since fracking started. You can get used to such news. But then, one day, it suddenly hits you: Hey, This Shouldn't Be Happening -- How'd This Come To Be Okay? *What the hell, over?*

From the Top: ☐ *Deeeeeeeep Breath.*

Once upon a time, there was *Time* magazine. *Time*, the magazine (not the human construct, *ti me*), took it upon themselves to chronicle various adventures, and adventurers, of this planet. In their June 9th issue -- which seems like a neat Time-travel trick, as it's only June 4th today -- there was a small blurb about Texas Tea, sort of: how Tea Party candidates had won a string of victories in Texas, despite Tea Party defeats in primaries around the country.

Well, now, this counts as a mixed bag in my book. First, there was a little sparkle of good news -- voters were apparently catching on, that the Tea Party was stuffed to the rafters with babbling yahoos, and were *finally* learning to stop shafting themselves by voting Tea Party morons into office.

(If you cannot tell, I think voting Tea Party people into office is against logic, sanity, and everyone's own best interests as people, as Americans, and as air-breathing, bi-pedal, mostly peltless mammals.)

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The accompanying stab of bad news leapt to the fore, too -- that voters in Texas had not yet figured out this elemental truth, that voting Tea Party *anything* was next-door-kin to begging and pleading for a turn at being roadkill.

Such news is dispiriting. It's a real setback for a quasi-hopeful humanist. I was rooting for the underdogs -- for all the intelligent, alert, and aware people in Texas who were trying very hard to remain in the 21st century, and not slip back to the 8th century. But, you know, some people just seem to *insist* on unravelling all the progress evolution bothered to knit together from the lungfish forward, and remain mired in the low-oxygen mud-pond of life.

Like a lot of news anymore, all you can do is shake your head and go forward in life -- or, maybe, you decide to succumb to the siren songs of Teabagger lore, and huddle in the fetal position, under the kitchen table, chastising the passing parade of Alice-in-Wonderland characters under there, browbeating them with boffo Tea Party tracts, spellbinding them all with fables of Happy Ever After Land, where *gummint keeps their damn hands off your Social Security and Medicare...*

Or not. If not, you go about your business, like I did. Some time later, I spotted the *Fire Catches Water* news once again. It had been simmering on the back burner of my mind. Then, while on a short trip to another city, I had accidental exposure to (gasp!) television -- a service not normally available through the air where I live (owing to my distance from cities) nor available by cable or dish (owing to my distance from money).

The show? Rachel Maddow's. On MSNBC. (I know of and like her work. We may not have teevee here, but the kerosene-fired computers still work fine.) It is on her show where I, and she, started to dig deeper into this Texas Tea fest. And it is here that we are all more fully informed about all this event -- and on a fluke, by complete accident, having stumbled across her show without planning to do so.

And, it is also here where it is learned that oil is still thicker than tea -- not that there was any doubt, especially as oil is sometimes *called* Texas Tea. However, what *was* surprising was the level of utter, bald-faced, in-your-face craziness being practiced, out in the open, with no shame whatsoever, and for everyone to see.

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Rachel has the goods and the whole story. It is worth your time. There's a link below. Meanwhile, the short version:

Basically, an oil industry expert won a seat in the Texas group that controls fracking, among other things. This is like putting pedophiles in charge of playgrounds. The trauma and effect will be much the same, just not as immediately obvious in the playground called Texas.

Drill, baby, drill.

* * * * *

All over the country, fracking is causing the water supply to catch fire. All over, rules are being written, or are already set in stone, making it a crime to know about, or tell anyone about, the chemical potions and brews used in fracking.

We have traded fresh drinking water so we can have the juice to run the washer and dryer and the dishwasher, the laundromat, the car wash -- and for the ability to drive our cars and heat our homes. We've traded away the right to *not* have earthquakes under our homes, from slant drilling, and our reward for that trade? Our bounty is benzene and whatever other gawdawful carcinogens are dumped into the fracked drinking water.

If you can light your water on fire at the faucet, what's it going to do to your coffee? To the kids? To the tea kettle? To our stomach linings, our kidneys, hearts, minds?

* * * *

If we lived in a world of superheroes, we could maybe call Mister Coffee, and Mister T, to the rescue, and have it be a humorous one. However, we do not live in a world of superheroes. We live in a world where an oil industry cheerleader controls whether fracking will occur. We live in a world where fire-water now means blazing H₂O, not booze. We live in a world where, if

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your water catches fire, it's pretty much *your* fault.

Wait -- scratch that. Make that *very much* your fault. *Exclusively much* your fault, in fact.

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That the Tea Party won anything, anywhere is terrible news. The thing I hadn't known was what was missing from that small article I'd first read in *Time*. What I saw was madness. What I am was not seeing was even worse. How many more layers am I not seeing?

I wonder -- how much worse might it be? For this story... *for any story?*

* * * * *

The Cuyahoga River used to catch fire, and pretty regularly, too. Some say it was a turning point, a cause for change, and the spur for landmark legislation, and for the EPA, and for the Clean Water Act -- a number of strict, We've Finally Had Enough reforms.

But that was back in the day, when the world was still obliged to make sense, and when people still payed attention -- and where truth, sanity, and community trumped profit. When people knew their limits, and knew when they were exceeded. When people knew how to drag things back from the edge.

Epilogue

Our home planet is 70% water and, until now, aside from some piddling larks in solar and wind power, we have insisted on remaining 98% *stoopit* about our energy production. One of those stats may be about to change.

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Key ingredients in this possible new recipe: Take one *Bureau of Ocean Energy Management*.
Fold in one
Florida Atlantic University
. Using one hand to hold a turbine system, test-drive it in ocean currents.

If it works, garnish with confetti and serve on a deceased bed of fossil fuel industries and supporters. Once perfected, serves one planetary system -- with plenty of leftovers.

I think we could all use a piping hot platter of Sanity for a change. Enough of the Teabagger crumpets and political strumpets. I say we give the lukewarm, weak Tea a heave-ho, and get to flipping more coins. There's a lot of water out there, and a lot of people, here, everywhere.

Time for an elixir that works -- this time, without killing the patient, or the coin-flippers.

Clarke's Laws: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clarke's_three_laws

Thalidomide birth defects: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thalidomide>

Love Canal -- the neighborhood over toxic waste: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_Canal

Bhopal gas disaster: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhopal_disaster

BP's Gulf volcano: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deepwater_Horizon_oil_spill

Windscale: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Windscale_fire

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Chernobyl: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chernobyl_disaster

TMI: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Mile_Island_accident

Fukushima -- so far: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fukushima_Daiichi_nuclear_disaster

Rachel and the Texas Tea -- story and video:

<http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2014/05/30/maddow-big-oil-beating-tx-tea-party-is-bad-news-for-residents-already-hurt-by-fracking/>

from MSNBC, direct: <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/the-flaming-wells-texas>

River Fire: http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Cuyahoga_River_Fire?rec=1642

and: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuyahoga_River

Ocean turbine test:

http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Energy-Resources/2014/06/04/Florida-to-host-paradigm-shifting-ocean-energy-project/7371401889230/?spt=htsv=1

Today's Bonus:

A reminder this has been going on for some time now -- *Gasland*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bH5-bOWyXa4>

and: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gasland>

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** For fun, you can also do a web search for water on fire, and see if you get fewer than the 369,000,000 hits that I got just now.*

Your bonus Bonuses:

A little about Art: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_C._Clarke

Arthur on the Mandelbrot set / fractals: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJA8mayMKvY>