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## Catastrophe, Collective Trauma, & the Origin of Civilisation

Part two

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*By Richard Heinberg*

In most cases of individual neurosis, psychoanalysts look for an early trauma, or emotional shock, in the life of the patient—usually a forgotten incident and often one from the pre-verbal period of life. Accordingly, it seems reasonable for the ethnoanalyst to attempt the same thing, difficult though it obviously is for anyone to find evidence for collective prehistoric emotional experiences.

— Roger W. Wescott, **The Divine Animal**

Our society is made up of vast numbers of traumatised individuals, and our culture has come into being through a universally traumatising process. The outcome—today’s technological civilisation with its massive psychopathologies and unending ecological disasters—is a collective reflection of the traumatised personality.

— Chellis Glendinning, **My Name Is Chellis & I’m in Recovery from Western Civilisation**

In the first part of this article (*New Dawn* No. 55, July-August) we began exploring the idea that civilised human beings exhibit stress responses (aggressive, controlling, and addictive behaviours; blunted affect; and generalised anxiety) because civilisation systematically traumatises them from birth as part of the process of domestication. Perhaps civilisation detaches human beings from nature — through agriculture, urbanisation, and technology — in order to impart a sense of security against unpredictable natural disasters; and perhaps civilisation wounds people and nature because it is wounded — i.e., because it began as a response to environmental trauma. We have as yet left some important questions unanswered. The principal one is simply, What was the catastrophe that lit civilisation’s fuse?

### Identifying the Source of Trauma

There are two classes of possible causes of civilisation’s original trauma: events that stemmed from human agency, and ones that did not. And of the latter — causes that arose beyond the human sphere — there are also two types: endogenous (those that resulted from processes operating within Earth’s systems) and exogenous (those triggered by an agent outside Earth).

It is theoretically possible that at least some of civilisation's ancient psychic wounds were self-inflicted. Freud believed that humanity's original trauma was the Oedipal crisis, in which sons in the primeval cave typically killed their fathers in order to possess their mothers. However, no archaeological evidence has ever been found to suggest that this actually happened, on even a small scale. A much more plausible scenario is that at the end of the Pleistocene — roughly 11,500 years ago — human beings allowed their populations to exceed the carrying capacity of the land and brought on starvation through overhunting.

It is also possible that some non-human agent was responsible for the catastrophe(s) that led humans to domesticate themselves. Likely non-human candidates of an endogenous nature include earthquakes, floods, fires, volcanoes, and climate change. Possible exogenous culprits include wayward comets or meteors and fluctuations in the Sun's energy output. How do we go about determining which (if any) of these possible non-human sources of trauma might have been the actual one? Naturally, we should consider the evidence — of which there are again two kinds: material and cultural.

The material evidence of ancient catastrophes includes ice cores, lake bed cores, tree rings, topographical anomalies, and fossils. From these, scientists have deduced that for the past 2.5 million years our planet has been on a climatic roller coaster — a general cooling trend featuring Ice Ages that come about every 100,000 years and last 90,000 years or so, during which temperatures fluctuate wildly, leading to intervening warmer periods of a few thousand years. We are in one of those warm periods now. It was during these past 2.5 million years, according to evolutionary biologists, that humankind evolved, its brain increasing in size fourfold. During the last 120,000 years (encompassing the most recent Ice Age) there have been roughly 20 sudden and drastic cooling and warming episodes, averaging one every 6000 years. The end of the last Ice Age occurred about 11,500 years ago; not long afterward, humans in some areas began the process of domestication. Like the beginnings and endings of the Ice Ages that preceded it, the close of the most recent glacial period came suddenly, and it brought devastation in its wake. Sea levels rose by some 300 feet over the course of centuries. Hundreds of species were extinguished, including (in America alone) the camel, mastodon, mammoth, ground sloth, giant peccary and giant beaver, dire wolf, short-faced bear, mountain deer, and saber-toothed cat. Some paleontologists believe that human beings hastened a few of these extinctions through overhunting.

Also, the Earth's magnetic field has apparently reversed its polarity some 20 times during the past 4 million years—most recently, about 12,500 years ago in the so-called Gothenburg flip. There seems to be some correlation between extinction episodes, climate change, and geomagnetic reversals. It is not clear whether climate fluctuation causes field reversals (through changes in the volume of ice at the poles), or field reversals causes climate change (via volcanic activity or a collapse of the ionosphere and ozone layer), or whether both are influenced by some exogenous agent.

Clearly, the Earth was not a quiet place during the time Homo sapiens was evolving. But what about the period when civilisation was emerging? More recent global climate spikes (not as severe as the ones 40,000 and 11,500 years ago) occurred at around 8000 b.c.e., 6000 b.c.e., 3100, b.c.e., and 1100 b.c.e. A climatological fluctuation known as the Little Ice Age lasted from 1200 to 1800 c.e., and was made even worse for parts of that period by volcanic eruptions that clouded the atmosphere and lowered temperatures worldwide for years at a time (1783 was the year of the “dry fog,” while 1816 was known as “the year without a summer”). Localised floods, earthquakes, violent storms, and volcanic eruptions known to have occurred during the past 10,000 years are far too numerous to list here, and it seems likely that archaeologists and geologists have discovered and interpreted evidence of only a fraction of such disasters that actually took place.

Most of these events appear to have been of endogenous provenance, and few (other than climate change and geomagnetic reversal) would have been global in impact. But in the case of global climate change — and, possibly, field reversals — extraterrestrial agents may have played a role. In the year 536, according to tree-ring measurements, just as many of the civilisations of the period were suffering major setbacks, there was a sudden world-wide decline in tree growth that lasted about 15 years. Since Greenland ice cores show no signs of large-scale volcanic activity for that time, the most likely explanations are comet impact or cosmic dust. British astronomers Victor Clube and Bill Napier have calculated, on the basis of observed cratering rates on the Earth and

Moon, that we should expect the collision of a meteor or comet “of several megatons energy to occur somewhere on Earth every 200 years or so.” Further, “a few dozen sporadic impacts in the tens of megatons, and a few in 100 to 1000 megaton range, must have occurred within the past 5000 years.” Comet collisions don’t always leave an obvious crater: the comet that struck near Tunguska, Siberia in 1908 (if, indeed, it was a comet) is estimated to have weighed 1000 tons; its fiery above-ground explosion flattened trees for miles in all directions but left no crater. We should expect an impact of similar energy about every 20 years on average; but, given that two-thirds of incoming meteors or comets fall into the oceans, one of similar size is likely to strike land only about once every 60 years. In short, the physical evidence shows unequivocally that our planet is disaster-prone, but it does not point to a single dramatic event that would have traumatised humankind once and for all. Rather, the possible sources of trauma are all too numerous.

We should next consider cultural evidence bearing on the nature of the catastrophe(s). While some mythologists (such as Joseph Campbell) have maintained that ancient myths contain no reliable historical data whatever, I have argued elsewhere (in **Memories and Visions of Paradise**) that “. . . anthropologists and archaeologists have uncovered many instances in which myths do unquestionably conceal [or reveal!] elements of historical fact”; there I cited the examples of the Klamath Indians’ memory-based myth of the origin Crater Lake, and Aboriginal Australian Dreamtime stories that feature animals that have been extinct for some 10,000 to 15,000 years. Every mythologist knows that tales of ancient catastrophes of one sort or another constitute an extremely widespread and common genre. Examples range from the biblical story of the Deluge to Plato’s account of the destruction of Atlantis; from South American myths of universal destruction by fire and water to the aboriginal Australian depiction of the end of the Dreamtime. Many cultures — including the Chinese, Hopi, Greek, Aztec, Iranian, and Indic — recall a series of four or five World Ages, each ending in catastrophe. Many catastrophe myths ascribe responsibility for these calamities to human beings.

If we were to attribute some historical truth to such myths, we would, I think, conclude from them (as from the physical evidence) that more than one catastrophe traumatised ancient humanity. Since many cultures viewed comets and other unusual celestial phenomena with extraordinary dread, we might also conclude that at least some of these catastrophes had an exogenous source. And since many myths blame the people themselves for catastrophes, we should leave open the possibility that some disasters were indeed humanly caused.

The first of these conclusions finds still more support in other fields. In individual psychology, the effects of trauma seem most severe and long-lasting in cases not of singular, but of repetitive abuse or injury. The Embers’ findings on the origins of violence (which we cited in Part I of this essay; see *New Dawn* No. 55) likewise suggest that if civilised humanity’s destructive tendencies arise from post-traumatic stress, the source would likely have been a series of disasters occurring at unpredictable intervals.

## Humanity: Wounded and Precocious

It appears that humankind has had a trying childhood. And just as some abused children cope with adversity by plunging themselves into intellectual or creative activities, perhaps humanity as a whole has done something similar. Neurobiologist William Calvin, in his **The Ascent of Mind: Ice Age Climates and the Evolution of Intelligence** (Bantam, 1990), suggests that it was by matching wits with frequent climate changes that our early ancestors learned to develop their capacities for language, culture, technological innovation, and ethics.

For biologists, the evolution of modern *Homo sapiens* constitutes one of the greatest of mysteries. We differ from the apes in a hundred ways: language, accurate throwing ability, concealed ovulation, dramatically increased brain-to-body size ratio, different hand anatomy, lack of body hair, descended larynx, flatter face, smaller teeth, and so on. It is not so difficult to explain how one or another of these developments could have occurred in a couple of million years, but all of them taken together constitute virtually a miracle of evolutionary transformation. Calvin suggests that we look to only a few basic causes, of which each would have had multiple effects. For example, if early humans spent much of their time living in open savannas, this might account for our transition to seed eating and our upright posture. And if we spent another phase of our development foraging for food along shorelines, living partly in water, this might explain features we share with the aquatic

mammals — our subcutaneous fat, salt-and-water wasting kidneys, tearing, and descended larynx, among others.

But what of brain size and intelligence? Calvin suggests that repeated, drastic climate fluctuations were the motivating factor, acting as a kind of evolutionary “pump” encouraging change in certain directions: “[W]e look at the back-and-forth Ice Ages and see in them not just overblown winter but a way of amplifying the effect of the wintertime natural selection. . . .” Calvin’s hypothesised winter-specialised hominid subtype — which would have relied more on hunting, and therefore would have developed better throwing skills than its more tropical cousins — would have expanded its population during warmer boom times in order to take advantage of ice-free land; when the ice returned, the hunters would simply have moved south. With each warm/cold fluctuation, the winter-specialised types would have grown to constitute a greater percentage of the overall hominid population.

Calvin suggests that it was through juvenilisation that these versatile hunters developed bigger brains for making, aiming, and throwing projectiles. The juveniles of most mammals have a bigger brain/body ratio than adults, as well as flatter faces and smaller teeth. If, in a given population, puberty gradually occurs earlier, somatic development will be cut short, and after many generations the adult population will acquire juvenile characteristics. Calvin argues that the alternation of harsh and hospitable climates during the past 2.5 couple of million years encouraged early maturity: during boom times “there [was] a race to fill up newly available ‘job slots’ afforded by an environment able to feed more mouths.” When the ice returned, juvenile body features were retained. And once brain size had grown, new uses were quickly found for all this new gray matter — such as the invention of language and culture.

Calvin emphasises that there is still a lot to account for and that the problem is complex — “So much brain enlargement in 2.5 million years is awfully quick by the standards of evolutionary biology” — and he admits that his explanation may not be the final one. An alternative theory he doesn’t mention is that human beings are the result of genetic experiments on the part of extraterrestrials. This suggestion is admittedly beyond the pale of conventional scientific thinking, but it is really not so far-fetched in light of ancient myths about culture-heroes and creator gods, and modern UFO sightings and abduction accounts. If the ET genetic-experiment hypothesis turned out to be true, it would not deny the role of catastrophes in the shaping of human culture and consciousness, but it would surely add a bizarre twist to the story.

Still, let’s assume that Calvin’s explanation (or something like it) is right: Catastrophe and trauma (via sudden, drastic climate changes at unpredictable intervals) have led us to become intelligent tool users. But it seems they have also planted seeds of alienation and distrust within our vastly enlarged brains. Perhaps, as Paul Shepard suggests in **Nature and Madness**, in addition to physiological juvenilisation we have also undergone a stunting in our psychological development. Civilisation, according to Shepard, produces people who are incomplete, infantile. Deep down we seem to believe that the gods are angry at us. What have we done wrong? We must be flawed, sinful children who deserve the gods’ (our parents’) wrath. Nature is cruel and chaotic. We must defend ourselves, propitiate the gods, and make sure we have a surplus for when the next disaster strikes.

## Some Problems and Possible Solutions

In this essay we are proposing an explanation for a great many cultural phenomena. The matters we have touched on are complex and raise many questions, which I hope to treat elsewhere in more detail than is possible here. Nevertheless, we might briefly consider three of the most obvious objections which our theory must face.

**Problem:** Why would only a few cultures react to catastrophes by developing civilisations? After all, most human cultures, historically, have maintained modest hunting-and-gathering, horticultural, or pastoral ways of life. Were these people not traumatised? If not, why not? If they were, why did they respond differently?

**Possible solution:** Even in the case of global disasters — climate change and comet impacts — the

effects would not have been geographically uniform. Moreover, it is entirely possible that distinct cultural groups would have been predisposed to handle trauma in varying ways. It is true that some cultures have maintained a much greater sense of harmony with nature than have others; however, evidences of collective psychopathology are not unique to Western civilisation: in nearly every culture it is possible to point to some institution, rite, or taboo that could have had its origin in mass psychological trauma.

**Problem:** Why were no other animals similarly affected? Why didn't horses, monkeys, squids, and parrots develop big brains, technology, language, and cultural neuroses?

**Possible solution:** Perhaps they were affected, but responded differently. The creation myths of many cultures speak of a time (before the catastrophes) when the animals were less aggressive or fearful and when a universal harmony prevailed throughout nature. Of course, such myths need to be regarded with healthy skepticism, but they may hold some kernel of historical truth. In most higher animals, behaviours are scripted by instinct, while in humans (for reasons William Calvin may be partly able to explain) culture has largely usurped instinct's role. If traumatic stress caused at least some humans to develop dysfunctional cultures, then it is possible that the same stressors caused at least some animals to develop dysfunctional instincts. The lemmings' suicidal boom-and-bust population behaviour is one possible example.

Humans' unique responses to stress may be traceable partly to their unique brain structure. In **The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind** (Houghton Mifflin, 1976/1990), Princeton psychologist Julian Jaynes anticipated Calvin in suggesting that "it is possible for the brain to be . . . reorganised by environmental changes." With the Ice Ages came the development of language, and with language came the invention of an analog inner world of words, paralleling the behavioural world "even as the world of mathematics parallels the world of quantities and things." Jaynes argued that, in its early stages, the use of this new linguistic ability was split between the brain's hemispheres: the right hemisphere spoke to the left, and its voice was interpreted as being that of a god. This bicamerality may have served to obviate the stress of decision-making during times of environmental change. But later, during the early historical period, as civilisations were developing, the bicameral organisation of the human mind began to collapse. This, says Jaynes, was partly due to the invention of writing: once the words of the gods were written, they became silent and could be turned to or avoided at will. But disasters also played a role: "The second millennium b.c. was heavy laden with profound and irreversible changes. Vast geological catastrophes occurred. Civilisations perished. Half the world's population became refugees. And wars, previously sporadic, came with hastening and ferocious frequency. . . ." The gods fell silent, and left-brain-dominant humans were left to fend as best they could. The result was the dawn of rational self-consciousness, of alienation and anxiety, and of a condition in which "we have become our own gods."

**Problem:** We have suggested that the traumatic energy of ancient disasters is passed along from generation to generation via civilised child-rearing methods. If so, we might expect the post-traumatic stress symptoms evident in civilised populations to gradually dissipate over the centuries and millennia, or at worst to remain constant. Yet we now face humanly generated social and ecological problems of unprecedented scope and severity. Why would these problems be increasing, if they are the effects of some ancient trauma?

**Possible solution:** It may be that civilisation is (or can be) a progressive social disease. In individuals, a progressive disease is one in which the body's natural defense systems are overwhelmed or subverted; rather than improving, the patient becomes sicker and sicker. Civilisation progressively re-traumatises itself — not only through child-rearing practices, but through economic inequality and poverty, environmental destruction, alienation from nature, and war. Thus as civilisation "advances," the effects of the original trauma are magnified. Add to this the impact of natural disasters that have occurred in relatively recent times — such as the Black Death in medieval Europe, in which nearly two-thirds of the population was wiped out, and which may have helped prime the European psyche for witch hunts and bloody colonial exploits.

The idea that our psycho-social disease may be a progressive one is disturbing, of course. Even worse is the realisation that we are infecting and killing our only potential therapists — the primal cultures of the world, who appear to have been less traumatised than ourselves, or to at least have

found more sensible ways of coping with their wounds. If we cannot look to them — and, realistically, we have no right to expect them — to save us from ourselves, then we must learn somehow to heal ourselves and one another.

## Recovering from Collective Post-Traumatic Stress

How would one go about treating an entire culture for post-traumatic stress? The difficulties involved are considerable — especially in a chronic case, or one in which the society in question doesn't want to be treated. It is difficult to know even where to begin, given a "patient" so huge, powerful, and deranged as our contemporary global civilisation. Such a task may actually be impossible. But perhaps we can heal ourselves and one another individually, at least to some degree, and thereby plant the seeds of a new sane and biologically benign culture. In order to do so, it would seem vital that we familiarise ourselves with what is presently known about individual trauma treatment and recovery.

There are several good books on trauma recovery, of which the most relevant is certainly Chellis Glendinning's **My Name Is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilisation**. Another helpful one is **How to Survive Trauma: A Program for War Veterans & Survivors of Rape, Assault, Abuse or Environmental Disasters**, by Benjamin Colodzin (Station Hill Press, 1993).

In cases where the original trauma is long past, the most important aspect of treatment seems to be the recollection and emotional processing of the traumatic event. Whether humankind as a whole can recall events millennia ago is problematic; it seems more feasible for individuals to bring to mind and face the specific ways in which they were taught — beginning at birth — to throttle their wildness and conform to a contorted system of beliefs and behaviours. A therapist or therapeutic community is often helpful in this regard — assuming that the purpose of therapy is not seen as merely to adjust more successfully to the society as it presently is.

Another step in recovery is to learn to feel our repressed grief and rage — as well as our repressed joy. Chellis Glendinning, Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy, environmental educator Annie Prutzman, and others have offered suggestions for ways to safely uncork the vessel of our dammed-up emotions, via psychodrama and storytelling.

It is also possible to benefit from techniques used in shamanic cultures for the re-integration of nature and psyche. Primal peoples resort to prayer, dancing, drumming, and purification rites in order to restore the wholeness of individual, community, and nature. While mere imitation of such rites may constitute a kind of cultural theft, we may nevertheless find similar ways of working in small groups to call upon ancestors, spirits, and natural forces to assist us in our healing. Recovery may not penetrate past the surface layers of consciousness without significant, deliberate lifestyle changes. As long as we are utterly dependent upon civilisation it is difficult to see its influences with any objectivity, or to forge a new relationship with the natural world. On the other hand, disconnecting from the civilisational system — via natural home-building, growing or gathering much of one's own food, and providing for other needs with a minimal use of money — tends to induce feelings of basic self-worth and competence.

Independence from the system need not be seen as abandonment of responsibility, however. Often a member of a dysfunctional family will stay in the abusive situation in order to try to fix it from within. In cases like this, a therapist will usually counsel the individual to leave, since it is only from a secure position outside the abusive situation that one can have a positive impact on those still within it. Perhaps something similar is true with respect to individuals awakening to the dysfunctionality of civilisation: we can be of more help to other people if we are not entirely dependent on the system that is progressively reproducing its woundedness. Then our activism is grounded not just in anger and pain, but in knowledge of workable alternatives.

Regaining our autonomy and reconnecting with life require deliberate effort, but the rewards are instantaneous. New avenues for play, creativity, and love open up before us precisely to the extent that we seek them.

As we do, we provide a platform for the next generation. It may be possible to forge a path toward

sustainable culture only so far in one lifetime. Perhaps our greatest responsibility, therefore, is to explore whatever routes we can, go as far along them as we can, and then pass on whatever we have learned. Children growing up in — or under — the dominant culture today are inevitably subject to nearly constant trauma, some forms of which are extremely sophisticated and seductive. Unless some young people are provided with effective tools for self-defense, self-expression, exploration, and creativity, and examples of what it is to be a relatively free and happy human, the way ahead looks pretty bleak.

## Implications for the Future

Of course, every sane person would wish to avert another disaster; everyone hopes that civilisation can somehow quickly reform itself so that we don't have to face massive starvation and ecological devastation in the coming century. But it would be foolish to ignore the implications of current trends. The likelihood is that those of us who will be around in the early decades of the next century will experience a catastrophe of one sort or another first-hand — either one that is humanly caused or an “act of God” whose effects are experienced far more severely as a result of population density and the interconnectedness and vulnerability of civilisation's systems of transportation, communication, food delivery, and political control.

How will people respond? According to Lewis Apteakar, vic