

The Curse not Talked About

Volker Brendel: Today is a beautiful autumn day. Leaves are turning in Southern Indiana and are displaying wonderful colors; a sight to behold. There is comfort in the predictability of the seasons. We know that summer will come to an end, autumn will come, and eventually winter and spring will follow. We take comfort in this orderly progression. We like to be able to predict our future, and yet our experience shows time after time that we don't do a good job of this. Who among us could have imagined our current life circumstances from the perspective of fall of 2019, looking ahead just one year? As strange as it may sound, a year ago was pre-epidemic. Many of us wouldn't have known what a coronavirus was, let alone how quickly it could spread across the globe and change almost everyone's lifestyle. And that is covering only the very small timescale of one year!

My mother is going to turn 92 in a couple of weeks, having lived in northern Germany all her life. That means she was born in 1928, five years before Hitler came to power. She was 11 at the start of World War II and a mere 16 when all that ended. Since then she has witnessed an amazing array of technological changes, changes in individual and societal conditions, as well as multiple crises on an individual, societal, and worldwide scale. Many of the details of what has unfolded would have been absolutely impossible to predict during this 100-year period.

In our garden work this week we came upon a particularly well-formed fossil showing a brachiopod and a crinoid—creatures that lived on the ocean floor in this area more than 250 million years ago. Yes, I said ocean floor—this entire land mass was closer to the equator and covered by a shallow ocean, and the hard remains of these animals are preserved in sediment. We still have the evidence of that life today, evidence of spectacular, unpredictable changes over a very long time scale.

Although we are not able to predict accurately what is in the offing, we must make an effort to perceive accurately what is to come, lest we will be called upon by future generations who could rightly challenge us with a simple question: where were you at the time, what were you doing, and why did you not see what was coming? We may well be in another time of crisis and tremendous change in which we are agents of change in one direction or the other.

Last Friday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations. He gave a pretty straightforward assessment of the world situation. Here is part of what he said:

“The world is in crisis, and not just because of the last few months. Not just because of COVID-19. But because of the last few decades. And because of us.”

“There are few consequences for countries that ignore international rules. For regimes that think might makes right. Few consequences for places where opposition figures are being poisoned while cybertools and disinformation are being used to destabilize democracies. Few consequences when innocent citizens are arbitrarily detained and fundamental freedoms are repressed. When a plane of civilians is shot from the sky. When women’s rights are not treated as human rights. When no one has any rights at all.”

“The international approach we relied on since the second half of the 20th century was built on an understanding that countries would work together. But now the same countries are looking inward and are divided. We need to recognize where we are. The system is broken, and the world is in crisis. And things are about to get much worse unless we change.”

Prime Minister Trudeau didn’t mince words, although he was diplomatic and wise enough not to name any countries and regimes specifically. Those who provided fodder for his remarks are well aware of who they are and what they’re doing. But by speaking the way he did, he put emphasis on everyone’s responsibility, not just singling out a few “evil regimes.” We all must change. We are all in this together. We all have responsibility. He clearly indicates that the structures that we have in place for how we operate together as nations are antiquated and are no longer functioning well. But we don’t need to look only at the interactions of nations; we see the same failure of interactions between political parties and between people at opposite ends of the opinion spectrum.

Something fundamental has to change in our way of interacting in order to solve the crises that we have created over the last decades. I think there is much to analyze here, but clearly a factor has been that we have operated in a world we imagine has expanding resources, assuming the attitude that things are here for the taking, for our generation to exploit. We assume there are no boundaries and no limits—on growing the human population, on deforestation, on mining the earth, on individual wealth accumulation. All our models of living have been built upon the confidence that there’s always something else out there that could be exploited to make up for the shortfall here. We assume that new markets will be opened up; new oil fields will be discovered; new technologies will bail us out. Well, it is pretty obvious that this ain’t so and that there is a price to pay for the self-centeredness of individuals, groups, and entire generations.

I want to address a wrinkle of human behavior that is not well recognized, but that is in fact a huge problem. I penned a few opening sentences for a potential op-ed piece. I do not know how this will be received, but let’s have a look:

“The curse not talked about

Everybody in the fall of 2020 is exhausted from the seemingly endless crises embattling us, ranging from the Covid-19 pandemic to the off-the-scale wildfires engulfing the entire west coast of the US, to renewed struggles for social justice. And yet there is a curse upon the earth that is more widespread and devastating than all of the listed ills taken together, a killer as deadly as cancer and heart attacks, a drain on our physical, emotional, and economic wellbeing. The curse operates in stealth, not because its effects are not in plain sight, but because it is so well camouflaged that almost everyone lives with it as “natural,” even “beneficial.” We seek the help of doctors and therapists for all kinds of problems, but never for the afflictions caused by this curse. On the contrary, we unwittingly often apply more of the curse as a remedy for some of its ill effects. There will be an outcry of disbelief when we call out the curse by its name. But its myth must be dispelled. The curse is nothing but the “attitude of ‘good enough’” and it is the cause of AGES – the Attitude of Good Enough Syndrome.”

Let’s explore this topic. I received a note from a friend this morning saying that he was in the midst of weatherproofing his house for the winter season. He saw a window of opportunity today. My friend is a wise man: weatherproofing now is good for what is to come. Let’s assume we hire out the insulation of windows and doors of our house, and the workman takes the attitude: well I’ve done ten windows already, never mind the other two, and we are done, this is good enough. Put weather stripping on three sides of the door but not the top or the bottom: good enough. There is a price to pay for this: a lot of heat gets lost through seemingly tiny holes. If you want to keep mice from coming into your garage, but you leave a little opening, all the mice will come in; your approach is almost as bad as doing nothing. Just one example: craftsmanship, if we stop at “good enough,” we live with the consequences.

Speaking from my experience as a teacher of undergraduate and graduate students—and as any other teacher knows—students often hand in problem sets where their “solutions” are partial; their essays are attempts at a logical thought flow; but it is not quite there. When you work on a mathematical problem, either you have solved the problem, or you haven’t. If you write an essay and the reader must guess what it is that you are trying to express, it’s not quite there. Maybe you should have put in more effort. But the prevalent attitude these days is, “This is good enough; give me partial credit.”

What about health? Do you feel fully healthy, or do you just get by? Medical research studies disease, not health. Our data come from cases where things go wrong. Ok, cancer cured; broken bones fixed. Good enough. You can go back to your usual life. But what about the larger dimension, what about being seriously healthy? You might be able to have twice as much energy as you usually have, think more clearly, move around your daily job with greater

ease. You could have a whole other dimension of experience if you actually focused on health. The list could go on and on.

Let's talk about social justice. Clearly, some progress has been made concerning women's rights, no question about it. Women can work in some professions now that used to be entirely the domain of men. And studies of salaries earned by women note that for every dollar a man earns in a profession now accessible to women, a woman will earn approximately 70 cents; right, 70% wages for the same job, just because of gender. But we have made progress: a woman can work in these jobs now. Good enough.

Occasionally we see a person of color on a company board or woman on the faculty of a chemistry or computer science department. Done. We now have diversity, don't we? Good enough.

There are a lot of people in the earth who diligently attend church services or other religious gatherings every week, and they may give 10% of their income to charity, and they may be engaged in good deeds, helping the elderly or whatever. Very consistent. Great effort. Maybe good enough.

But if all that is good enough then why is the world in all the misery that we see all around? Is that really the world we want to live in? The world we should be living in? The heaven we are supposed to make visible on this beautiful planet? I would think there's a little bit of something else that needs to happen.

We can see an outcry rising, objecting to such an idealistic, elitist view. For example, it is thought to be impossible to find the ideal partner in a relationship. The advice given is to find a good one and then start working things out. Be happy with whatever your starting point is, where you are, work with that and don't pursue pipedreams.

How can we possibly say this AGES illness is more devastating than cancer and heart attacks, shootings, accidents, wildfires, coming climate change and so forth? Are we showing no respect for and empathy with our fellow citizens who are afflicted by all of this directly?

Good point, but maybe we should take another honest look. Do we believe that the pandemic since fall 2019 is a natural disaster, something that human beings have no hand in? Absolutely not. First, human beings have responsibility for the very first transmission of the coronavirus from wild animals to humans, facilitated by encroachment on wildlife habitats and an insatiable appetite for hunting and eating other living forms. There are consequences to human self-centered behavior without regard for the natural world. Secondly, mistakes were made in curbing the spread of the virus after outbreaks were recognized. Measures were taken that seemed good enough at the time but turned out in hindsight not to be so.

Are all the current wildfires “natural” catastrophes? Clearly, some of the fires were ignited by lightning storms. But in the end, it is again the unbridled human encroachment on the natural environment that turns such fires into catastrophes, rather than running their limited course with beneficial effect.

What about climate change? We don’t need to rehearse all the factors to which human activities contribute. Wherever we look, we as human beings have exerted our responsibility in the best case by the attitude of this is the best we can do. But in many cases, this turns out not to be adequate, and in some cases devastating so.

Is there an alternative? I think these days it is not very popular to mention that we actually have an inbuilt compass of integrity, a way of perceiving what is right. We like to hide behind relativism, but we do this at our own peril. In my own experience there certainly is a moral compass. For example, it clearly shows when I’m tempted to take shortcuts by calling something good enough while I quite well know that the shortened action is not quite right. No need for great confessions to be made here. It is a question of observing our daily lives. For example, cleaning the kitchen, particularly when you live with other people. Are you doing it right or just good enough? Taking care of things in general: is our care complete, or is it just so good enough, short of what is needed?

Let’s examine our behavior and interactions with other people. Hopefully this is not outright evil, maybe even good; no conflicts, no particular feuds. But are our interactions based on the highest expression of nobility and character accessible to us?

That is really the only lasting contribution we can make, in all seemingly small circumstances and in all seemingly bigger circumstances. As has been said, the way you treat the least among us is the way you treat the one you respect the most. Obviously, I am paraphrasing here to indicate that this paradigm is true, independent of any cultural or religious context.

We do have a better scale than “good enough.” We know and can perceive when we do what is right. There is no substitute for that. As we express and conduct ourselves in that way in our seemingly small interactions every day, we generate the capital of nobility and fine character. This becomes evident in everything we do, and it absolutely has its effects in the wider world.

Everyone is rightly included in the company of noble men and women, noble beings here to express our finest and let that radiate into the world, with beneficial effects not only in our own lives but well beyond. By doing what is right in everything, we build our strength and credibility to be agents for bringing heaven into earth. Isn’t that what we are here for?

Excerpts from comments:

Laura Fisher: Good enough is never good enough. If it has our name on it, it has to be perfect. It is that long term living in perfection (which we can easily access from a higher vantage point) that makes us available now to handle any tough stuff that comes along, because we have already been doing this; we have never settled for good enough.

Bill Isaacs: There is a lovely word in the human language: “mediocre.” It means halfway up the mountain. There is a true stance, a true note in every moment, a perfect note. There is no possibility of accessing that from the humanly oriented identity, and there’s no other option if you are in true identity. It as simple as that. In the human state we are trying to climb up the mountain, and we are not getting there. But the reality is, I am the mountain, and that is what I express now.

September 27, 2020

Volker Brendel: 4419 S. Inverness Crest, Bloomington, IN 47401

Pre-Service Music

1. Dappled Light

Composed by Luke Howard and performed by Jess Gillam & Jess Gillam Ensemble

2. Emerald and Stone

Composed by Brian Eno and performed by Jess Gillam & Jess Gillam Ensemble