There is a wonderfully cheesy 'Psychological' B movie from the fifties in which the heroine awakens into a dream where she finds herself at a Fair Ground. She is part of the crowd that is shuffling towards the Merry-Go-Round. The music is blaring and the riders are screaming.

She steps onto the ride and quickly begins to realize that all is not well. It is too crowded, it is hard to hold on, let alone sit, and the whole contraption is speeding up.

She struggles to get off but it is going too fast. It goes faster and faster. There is no safe way off or out. People are losing their grip. She is terrified. Screams. Fade to black.

When a man named Maier wrote his book 'Frustration - goal seeking behaviour without a goal' in 1944, he helped spawn a branch of psychological research now loosely called *'learned helplessness'*.

Maier's work seems more important today than it has ever been.

In a nutshell, what Maier showed was, if you take an animal (even a relatively simple animal like a rat) and coerce it to go through the motions of solving an insoluble problem, like running a maze with no way out, it will soon go crazy.

The version of crazy behaviour you get depends on the animal. It may roll itself up in a coma-like state, bite itself, bite the handler, defecate on itself, and so on. *The feeling of 'helplessness' can do this.* Ask anyone.

Humans are no different.

It is a truism that the world is speeding up. Technological advances and the Second Law of Thermodynamics have seen to that. *No matter which industry you study, shorter, faster, better, cheaper, more efficient will be chipping away at any existing industry structure*.

In some industries, the pace of change or the race to just stand still is so intense that an incumbent cannot stay long in a job if they are to stay healthy. The Japanese even have a word for death by work!

It is interesting to wonder how this phase of our planetary society will play out. Will we all go mad with frustration, knowing that we cannot win? Will we put up with it until we have enough saved that we can retire early and let someone else worry? Will we become apathetic, knowing that nothing can be done? Will we become savages in the workplace? Will we heroically battle on with a positive mental attitude, and help make it get better?

Interesting, isn't it?

Scary too, for some.

This is the picture of the Thomas Lawson. It illustrates the principle of a 'system limit'. Every system has a limit, or a set of limits beyond which the system does not function. The Thomas Lawson was the last ditch stand made by sailing ship manufacturers who wanted to stop steam ships taking their business. Add more masts, they thought.

It failed. It was too top heavy, and you could not steer it properly. It was at the limit of what you could do with wood, canvas and the Laws of Fluid Dynamics. *More is not better.*

Some systems are a long way from their limit. The Internet in the 1990's grew exponentially, as you would expect. The more people connected, the better. The same was true of motor cars in the early 1900's. More was just fine.

If we looked at the Merry-Go-Round of Life on our planet today, we could ask: *"How close are we to important system limits."* How about people? Or the World? We could be near or far from the system limits in either case.

We might know we are close to human system limits if we count more 'signs of madness' or emotional misbehaviour. The same will be true of earth if we witness major environmental dislocations. Size and frequency of events can help calibrate timings of large dislocations.

Using this notion, *I can see at least four plausible world scenarios coming to pass*. They may all simultaneously come true in some form or another depending, on hindsight, where the system lies with respect to its limits.

The *"New Hong York Kong for All"* Scenario

Let's start by assuming that the planet gives out before the people. This is my own personal nightmare. In that world, the inexorable pressure for efficiency, returns on investment, and the ability of the powerful and rich to hide their assets, lead to the development of a mindless, international, economical machine that no one person can conceive of and no organization can control.

In that world, the natural environment continues to degrade. The planet's temperature inexorably climbs until a significant catastrophe happens.

Evidence to the effect that we are on this path might be, for example, if the 'conveyor belt' of warm continental Atlantic drift water, that runs from Florida to Europe, just stopped working. At that point, Europe would get the message that something important is up because it would become as cold in the winter as Labrador gets.

Mind you, we could still ignore this one and see what breaks next. Procrastination is useful that way.

Living in that world, you would expect more violence domestically and internationally, more unpleasantness at work, more need to sedate the masses, more and more meaninglessness to the experience of Life. But as long as there is some payoff, you would go along with it.

Probably much lower birth rates and attempts to come up with a viable 'counterculture' would be common.

It would not be fun by any means.

The *"Technology Makes Space"* Scenario

In this scenario, technology comes to the rescue.

What is needed in the first scenario is room. Freedom to breathe and explore new spaces.

In the early part of the 1900's, the phone system was growing so fast that dire predictions were made about the world running out of copper for all the phone lines needed, and running out of women to run all of the switchboards. System limits again.

Today, we know that technology came to its own rescue. Phone lines were buried and new switching technology obviated the need for all of those switchboard operators.

In this second scenario, the Internet, or something like it, turns out to provide an infinite environment that people can explore, become homesteaders of their own virtual ranches of value that end up having little environmental impact. People emigrate into this land and farm their own ideas. They abdicate from the madness of the physical world which, starved of people willing to play the game, is itself downsized.

Given this scenario, would we be wise enough to develop a system of Planetary Governance that we would all be on the hook for, and participate in?

Time will tell.

The *"Shift in Consciousness"* Scenario

In this world, many of us remember that we are living miracles. Carbon based life forms. Sentient bags of seawater that got lucky.

In this third scenario, Science is reintroduced to Art and Spirit. Or better yet, Art and Spirit are reintroduced to Science.

We become literate again in the means of evolving our Selves, after a twenty thousand-year hiatus. We relearn that this beautiful Life is not a dress rehearsal, and we assert our Selves.

It may be that, here too, we see the emergence of Planetary Governance.

The *"Trust Me, I'm an Economist"* Scenario

I'm rooting for this one. What a world this would be.

Imagine, if you will, that in this world, everything is just fine. We are not near any system limits. The description of physics, modelled by the 'Sandpile' effect, shows that, in hindsight, the turbulence that was evident in the late 20th century was simply a natural, if bumpy, phase transition that has led to a comfortable world with a 'nearly' balanced, sustainable world population, where wealth is generated by an exchange of timely creative ideas.

According to this scenario, global warming was no such thing. It was a natural, stochastic event overlying a statistically significant, but utterly unimportant human trend effect. In fact, the Ozone hole was always there.

Everybody, hang on! We'll get there. Trust us, we know - we are Economists.

SO WHAT?

This is where the fun begins.

A Little Mind Bending Experiment
in the spirit of the Too Serious! philosophy

There is nothing new in any of these scenario stories. So what do we do with them?

I am suggesting that we build a small set of mutually exclusive scenarios, and develop triggering events that can be used as early warning systems. Like the caged canary in the coalmine - warning of imminent danger.

The path that we are likely to take, as a race, is:

- ◆ Short term focus
- ◆ Politically expedient

Can we begin to trace the path that we will take? How will we steer? How can we take action when we are all so busy?

Hmmm ... Maybe we need a new type of political party.

On the other hand, maybe it is a mistake to assume that these scenarios are all that there are. Retrospective analyses of scenarios generated in the 1960's by this type of method suffered consistently across all world conceptions by the limitations of the world as it was in the 1960's.

So, if we could project ourselves thirty years into the future, what would we discover about our world today from that perspective? What do we find cool today that will reek of 'cheese' tomorrow?

It might be that some of our sacred cows, including my own, look ridiculous. It might be that our conceptions of the 'possible', say, from a technological perspective, are far too narrow. Or it might be that our conceptions of ourselves and our minds are just plain wrong.

With so much uncertainty and equivocation in the topic, perhaps the thing to do would be to compute some sort of answer (42????). The type of computer I envisage would be like a human neural net, with all of us on the planet contributing the solution. Our collective *best answer at the moment*.

We will still run the risk of looking cheesy, but someone must provide a framework, some stopping rules and some steering rules for this planet.

Hmmm ... I wonder if 'political party' is what I mean.

What do you think I mean? What do you think? Do you know? If you do, and especially if you don't, email me your thoughts. I will do my best to edit the responses, and perhaps we will all shed light and leadership on this and other important issues.

Cliff Saunders
Wonderer