

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

Chapter 3 Late High Fiesta

During Spring Break, my family and I drove from Santa Fe to Los Angeles, an old stomping ground for Gen and myself. It was a classic American road trip, complete with fast food, generic motels, and ... high gas prices? This latter condition gave the sojourn an anachronistic feel, as if we were characters in a diorama in some giant museum. “Look, honey” I could almost hear someone say, “it’s back in that age when people could still afford to drive their cars long distances!”

I mentioned this to Gen as we traveled and she laughed, even though she understood that I was only half-kidding. As an archaeologist, she knows all about the passing of ages and eras – and she concurs that America is in the process of a major historical transition.

In fact, the trip illuminated both extremes of the current, odd, excessive chapter of our national history that I have been calling ‘Late High Fiesta.’

At one extreme was Gen’s cancer. This was main purpose of our 2000-mile expedition – to visit her oncologist and review her progress. Two years ago she was diagnosed with a very rare and relatively new form of cancer called carcinoid tumors, a serious but slow-growing disease. It required a specialist and three surgical ‘interventions’ to control, including the removal of a portion of her liver. The result, fortunately, was good news. The latest round of tests revealed her to be essentially cancer-free, though she must maintain vigilance (and a monthly shot) for the rest of her life.

Although the precise cause of carcinoid tumors remains a medical mystery to doctors, its source, they told us, was almost certainly environmental. It was likely, in other words, that some part of the toxic, synthetic, and increasingly abnormal project we call ‘civilization’ had poisoned Gen. Maybe it was our time in Los Angeles in the 1980s. Or the power lines near our house after our move to Santa Fe in the early 1990s. Or the proximity to Los Alamos, a nuclear weapons lab, during an archaeological survey she worked on. Whatever the cause, and despite our efforts to live as healthily as possible after our twins were born, industrialism had struck home.

At the other extreme, of course, was Disneyland.

Say what you will about the “Happiest Place on Earth,” it deserves its sobriquet. Sterling and Olivia love the place; and so do we. In fact, I’ve been going to Disneyland since I was their age – back in a prehistoric time when you needed an ‘E Ticket’ to get on the best rides. Sure, the park is as phony as baloney, but isn’t that the point? We certainly thought so. After a couple of days of confronting cancer, battling mind-boggling traffic, eating food-like substances in generic restaurants, and negotiating a labyrinthine megalopolis (my patience has faded along with my memory of LA), we were ready for grinning mice and singing bears.

It worked. We were happy for sixteen straight hours.

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I look at it this way: if Late High Fiesta means we have to suffer the consequences of industrial diseases why shouldn't we participate in its manufactured happiness as well? Besides, a smile is a smile, after all, no matter what the source.

You won't hear our children complaining. That's because the Fiesta's organizers are very good at what they do. On the drive to LA, for example, we stopped for two days at a sunny resort in Phoenix that featured a wide assortment of watery amusements, including a giant slide, a lazy 'river,' a noisy waterfall, a relaxing hot tub, and enough chlorine to choke a school of whales. The kids had a blast. They especially enjoyed floating the lazy river atop the huge inflated donuts supplied by the resort. Gen relaxed with a book in a poolside chaise while I camped out in the hot tub.

What we were doing, of course, was precisely the purpose of the whole Fiesta itself: relax, indulge yourself, forget about tomorrow. Limits? Consequences? Don't be a killjoy. We'll worry about that later. Meanwhile, party on.

And what a party it's been. Not only have we been going at it full tilt since World War II, we've come to think of the Fiesta as "normal."

I know I do. Take where I live, for example. In the American West, one of the chief intoxicants of the Fiesta was cheap gas, which begat long-distance driving (among many other novelties) for millions of Westerners. The road had a huge influence on me. It began a few days before my sixth birthday when my parents went West in a covered station wagon, moving us from staid Philadelphia to frontier Phoenix as part of one of the first waves of mass suburban immigration.

My earliest memories center on driving – with my father, who worked clear across town; with my friends, who seemed just as restless as I was; and by myself, indulging in every minute of my unleaded independence. Cheap, instant mobility became second nature to me. I grew to adulthood in an age defined by an easy horizon.

The author Wallace Stegner once divided the West's denizens into two camps: boomers and stickers. I was not a sticker. I've moved sixteen times in forty-seven years, lived in four cities, and traveled hundreds of thousands of miles by car or truck. I boomed along with my cohort, drunk on 80 cent-a-gallon gasoline, reveling in my charter membership in the Interstate Generation.

I cherish my independence to this day. When I die, they'll have to pry the steering wheel from my hands. That's why I keep driving despite my realization that the era of cheap gas is coming to an end. And when it ends, so will the Fiesta, most likely.

I was born in 1960, very near the peak of global oil discovery. Look at a graph of the history of oil exploration and you will see that it starts in 1859 with Colonel Drake's famous "black gold" gusher in Titusville, Pennsylvania. The rate of new strikes grows steadily from there, with oil fields discovered in Texas, California, and other locations around the nation. Then the graph line rises steeply in the 1930s as the first of the great, giant oil fields are discovered in obscure, far-off nations like Saudi Arabia and Iran. After World War II, major discoveries are commonplace.

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In the U.S., however, the rate of discovery of new oil had quietly peaked. The first person to notice was a petroleum geologist named M. King Hubbert, who worked for one of the major oil companies. Taking note of this peak, he made a series of mathematical calculations, eventually projecting that U.S. oil production, while still rising at the time, would peak around 1970 and then decline inexorably after that.

His calculations proved to be exactly on target. Domestic oil production peaked in 1970 at 10 million barrels a day, give or take a barrel. Today, American production is half that total, which includes Alaskan oil (also in decline). In other words, for the U.S. the graph turned out to be a classic bell curve – a steady rise followed by a steady decline – not an unending arrow pointed upward.

It won't be any different for the globe either. Shortly before he died, Hubbert made his prediction about global oil production: it would peak sometime around the year 2000. While his calculation appears to be off by a few years, it doesn't change an essential fact: the arrow will eventually point downward for the globe too. Depletion is our future.

But not yet – as we fully experienced on our Spring Break adventure. Depletion might not even hit during the lifetimes of myself and Gen, much to our relief, I suspect. That's because we both grew up in Abundance. We were born in a period of time I call 'Low Fiesta.' It began after World War II with the ramp-up of an American economy stoked by cheap fuel, new technology and access to large quantities of natural resources. Low Fiesta was characterized by an unbounded faith in Progress, the fruits of which became manifest in many levels of American society (think James Dean in *Giant* or The Clampetts in *The Beverly Hillbillies*). It is symbolized by the roadster, the Interstate highway system, and the suburb.

We came of age during 'Middle Fiesta' – a period covering the Yom Kippur War, oil shortages, price spikes, national soul-searching, disco, moral malaise – and the election of Ronald Reagan with his utopian vision of a 'shining city on a hill.' Forget that self-sacrifice stuff, he insisted, it was morning in America again. He was right – soon morning became a bright, shiny day.

We didn't argue. In the late summer of 1980, Gen and I drove from her home in Albuquerque to our third year of college in Portland, Oregon. It was a bright, shiny adventure for two young people, freshly acquainted, eager to make our own path together. We traveled in a gas-guzzling yellow Jeep Cherokee, complete with 8-track stereo. We camped, we hiked, we explored new territory – but mostly we drove. Gas was cheap and the horizon unlimited, just as it had been since our 16th birthdays.

It only got better. By 1990, Middle Fiesta, with its alternating states of Anxiety and Greed, gave way to High Fiesta – a full-blown party of awesome scale and noise. Clashes between critics of Reaganomics, fretful over the consequences of his doctrine of unlimited growth, and the go-go barons of Wall Street and Silicon Valley, gave way to a trance-like condition of euphoria in the nation. Any questions about the capacity of the planet to support the expanding 'project of civilization' were lost in the roar of party-goers, as the music and the dancing grew louder and more frenzied.

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We danced too. After college, Gen and I moved to Los Angeles, ostensibly to attend graduate school, but in reality to enjoy ourselves. Once there, we kept driving – to the beach, to work, to restaurants, to New Mexico for the summer, to the mountains, to anywhere cheap gas and a lead foot would take us. Eventually, we sobered up a bit and moved to New Mexico for good, deliberately choosing to leave behind our gridlocked lives in the City of Angels.

Late High Fiesta began roughly with the election of George W. Bush to the presidency of the United States. Not long before, the price of oil had plunged to \$11 a barrel, prompting a cover story in The Economist magazine titled “Drowning in Oil.” The cover photograph showed two workmen, completely drenched in black gold, trying to close a spouting well. This image captured this period perfectly – the party had kicked into high gear and spread like wildfire across the planet.

About the same time, Gen and I started a family, finally. We waited later than most, for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was our desire to keep dancing. We settled into Santa Fe, eventually buying a house. We worked on our careers – Gen as an archaeologist, and myself as a nonprofit director – before Sterling and Olivia came along. Everything changed after that. But still, we drove.

As Sterling and Olivia grew, we visited ranches, national parks, beaches, hotels, restaurants, resorts. We drove and drove and drove. And we’re still driving. Why not? It’s a great time to be alive, frankly. As we departed from the sunny resort in Phoenix last April, Gen remarked that western civilization has been aiming at this moment for thousands of years. Just look around us: there’s plenty of food and energy, tons of leisure, little heavy labor, few wants, plenty of ease. Consider what earlier societies had to endure: periodic famines, slavery, oppression, cruelty. Society has worked hard for a long time to create this era of high comfort. It won’t give it up without a fight.

Neither will many of our cohort, I bet, despite clear signs of trouble ahead. How our children will feel about all this some day is an open question. I await their judgment with some trepidation.

There is hope, however. I know because I *heard* it during lunch at Disneyland, of all places. Seeking carbon-based food-like substances for our hungry children, we stopped at a malt shoppe on Main Street for a fill-up. As we ate, we listened to a talented piano player fill the air with merry ragtime tunes. Soaking up the music, which washed over me like a warm breeze, I was suddenly struck by a thought: while the human species has done a laundry list of rotten things over the centuries and has now put itself, and the planet, in a perilous spot, we’re the same species that invented ragtime. No other species did it. We did.

We’re an inventive and energetic species, full of love and creativity. Watching and listening to the piano player that day, seated in the heart of an iconic temple to the Fiesta, surrounded by friends and family, content, I had another thought: we’re up to the challenges ahead.

We have music.