

The World at a Tipping Point

America and the world seem precariously balanced between those who wish to deny the many problems facing mankind and those who insist that the human race address the multiple crises confronting the planet. Winslow Myers sees reason to hope that the world will tip in a positive direction.

By Winslow Myers

The brilliance of the “Mad Men” television series lies in the crackerjack acting and script, but even more in the way the series dramatizes the paradigm shift of American women from gross subjugation to rough equality.

In an early episode, protagonist Don Draper reluctantly allows his wife to consult a (male) psychiatrist, and then calls the doctor, who casually violates confidentiality.

The series explains much about how the males of my generation often haplessly misunderstood – or deliberately ignored – the autonomous subjectivity of females.

This begs two questions: what blindnesses operating in the present cultural moment might be illuminated by talented scriptwriters as they look back from the perspective of 2040?

And second, what is the vision that orients us as we work to ensure that there will *be* a future to look back from in 2040?

American politics in 2011, in the run-up to the next presidential election, seems to operate in a weird bubble of denial, the engine of which is politicians pandering for votes. No one gets to be a President or Senator by emphasizing such unvarnished truths as:

–Oil and coal companies exercise too much power to slow or prevent altogether an incentivized transition to clean and sustainable forms of energy generation.

–People of wealth and large corporations do not pay their fair share of taxes, and as long as Congress is in thrall to lobbyists, reform of the tax code toward simplicity, transparency and fairness will be difficult in coming.

–Some American financial institutions characterized as “too big to fail” are insufficiently regulated, making money off the misfortunes of ordinary citizens, intensifying the grotesque differences between the incomes of the super-rich and all the rest of us.

–The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are obscenely expensive stalemates that have not increased our security, and may have created more terrorists than they have killed.

–Nuclear weapons have become completely useless as instruments of deterrence.

–The U.S. defense budget is bloated and lacks accountability.

–Global climate instability is clearly being intensified, if not caused, by human activity.

–The U.S. military is the biggest user of fossil fuels and polluter in the world, even as it plans to fight wars caused by the same extreme climate events that are presently intensifying chaos and dislocation for millions.

–The debt ceiling of nations may be negotiated or engineered, but the debt that comes from the unsustainable assault of too many humans on the living systems of the Earth is non-negotiable.

Coral reefs are dying; the oceans are polluted with plastic; many fish species have been harvested almost to extinction; tropical rain forests are still being put to the torch or the saw; polar icecaps and mountain glaciers continue to melt at faster than expected rates.

But there is good news also, about which we also do not hear enough from our candidates:

–There are millions of non-governmental organizations springing up around the world that agree upon the values of human rights for all, eco-sustainability, nonviolence, and democratic structures, the largest mass movement in history, says entrepreneur and ethicist Paul Hawken.

One important new organization is Awakening the Dreamer, which offers citizens a free half-day seminar that awakens us to the real challenges we face, and the real possibility of meeting them.

–War just might be a dying institution. Wars of decolonization or proxy wars between superpowers have scaled back to zero since the end of the Cold War. While still horrible, contemporary wars kill fewer civilians and soldiers than some of the conflagrations of the not-too-distant past.

Still, this optimism about war fails to include the continued presence of massive numbers of nuclear weapons, nor the ever-increasing effects of climate change upon the poorer nations, nor global population growth, nor the unpredictable element in current events.

New World

We find ourselves waking up in a whole new world, where rich and poor occupy the same leaky boat in a polluted sea.

Ensuring the future requires a fundamental shift in thinking from “I am separate” to “We are one”, a paradigm shift from measuring our economic success quantitatively to finding new qualitative criteria.

From turning reflexively toward war to moving aggressively to prevent war. From grotesquely large military budgets to humanitarian aid that directly meets human needs. From candidates who deny global warming to candidates who advocate for a reorientation of priorities on the level of a planetary Marshall Plan.

None of this will happen unless we all get involved, and push and question and become an active force that leaders cannot ignore.

This is the time when candidates are spending the most time listening to ordinary citizens. The questions we ask can be powerful agents of a new awakening.

If that came to pass, we might someday enjoy a TV series that looked back through the decades to dramatize the gradual end of our delusions.

It might make us wince at the “windy militant trash” (Auden) of present political discourse just as we wince at the dated chauvinism of the “Mad Men” era, but we might also be celebrating how far we had come.

Meanwhile we have a long way to go, baby.

Winslow Myers, the author of *Living Beyond War: A Citizen's Guide*, serves on the Board of Beyond War (www.beyondwar.org), a non-profit educational foundation whose mission is to explore, model and promote the means for humanity to live without war.
