

Steering the Beast

Why Do I Do the Work I Do

White American male that I am, burdened with dubious privilege, I can thank the Vietnam War, and the Kent State tragedy specifically, for first radicalizing and then spiritualizing me. By my senior year in college I had taken a first of several vows in the Eastern tradition, was celibate, nearly vegan, and sporting the name Karmananda, officially given by a Hindu monk. *"He who attains Liberation through selfless service to humanity."* As you might imagine, all of this horrified family, friends, and frat brothers. This was Kentucky. This was 1972. This was unheard of.

I hated the name Karmananda. Had a nice ring, but the idea of serving humanity interested me not at all. Going to a cave in the Himalayas, shooting energy up my spine, angling hard towards the Light and getting the hell out of this hellish place—that was my idea of a good time. Funny how things turn out.

I nearly made it to Asia, but an incident at the Mexican border sent me back to Kentucky, and to 20 years in the mountains of Appalachia instead—farming, leading a spiritual community, working against agribusiness and for family farmers, hating corporations and contemporary American culture, resigned to exile, a stranger in a strange land.

From this perch I developed the land and myself, read a lot, considered various political, economic, and social analyses that might explain the bizarre predicament we were in on planet earth, studied the world. Twenty years later I left that farm, that community, that life, armed with various hypotheses, committed to the life a little Hindu monk saw in me many years earlier.

Perhaps nothing can now halt the momentum that threatens frogs, people, nations, ethnic groups, entire ecosystems, perhaps the fabric of life as we know it. We face a brave new world of global climate change, species extinction, social, political, religious, and economic ferment and uncertainty. A nasty brew of a world, with have and have nots, people killing each other, systems that are utterly corrupt.

I have believed for 30 years that we are at an utterly pivotal, tectonic moment as a civilization and planet. The moment of truth. In the vast scope of the 13.7 billion year experiment called the Universe, such moments can last a long time. But I feel that within the next 20 years, the die will be cast one way or the other, for good or ill. Chilling potential futures await us along certain pathways. And sane, workable futures await us along others. I do the work I do because I want us to make the right choices moving forward. Because I love this marvelous earth, this shining planet. I love human beings. And deeply, in my heart, I have faith in us. Long term I believe we're going to make the changes. But this is a dark moment indeed, and as students of history know, things do not always work out. In the short run, at least.

It is our watch. It is our responsibility. It may well be our destiny. *"There are no passengers on Spaceship Earth, we are all crew"*, said Marshall McLuhan. All hands on deck! Rapid change and remarkable innovation are essential.

Blame capitalism if you like, but capitalism will continue to be a dominant force shaping our collective life on Earth. Blame nationalism. Blame terrorism. Blame globalization and corporatization. Blame whoever you think is responsible. Whoever you think is the Beast. I've concluded that we cannot kill the Beast. We don't have the power or the time. We can only Steer the Beast.

Steer the beast towards evolutionary adaptation, towards social and environmental innovation, towards a saner, safer, smarter world. To relieve suffering. To promote happiness. For the benefit of all who live...

David Sawyer
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