Civilization Seen Through an Addiction Model Lens: Social justice, societal maturity and “social sobriety”
by Lance Echo-Hawk, MA, LPC, LMHC, NCAC-II
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Introduction
This is an essay about our modern culture’s addiction-like dependency upon the benefits of civilization (BOC). A benefit of civilization refers to the array of technological gifts from the modern industrial age in which we live. BOCs are the everyday things easily taken for granted, forgetting what a wonder they would be just a hundred years ago. These are things like cars or jet airplanes, clean running city water and electricity; things that vitally connect us to modern life. Importantly, our continued enjoyment of modern day BOC’s is totally dependent upon a highly evolved and complex infrastructure composed of industrial systems such as power grids, cellular towers, highway systems, railways, and water and sewer lines. A complex web of energy burning industries is needed to keep it all running.

What are the parallels between addiction as we normally think of it and our modern day dependency upon BOC’s? That is what we are thinking through in this essay. We typically think of alcohol or other drugs when we list substances of abuse. We’re expanding that list here for the sake of assessing addiction at the societal collective level. We frame BOC’s, when not used wisely and in moderation, as another potential substance of abuse.

Addiction affects the person right down to a cellular, neuro-biological level. Cells in the body change the way they function. This essay looks for ways in which an addicted human collective with its individual members (the collective body’s cells, so to speak) compare to an addicted human body with its addiction-affected cells. A picture of tolerance, dependency, and the progression of disease all take shape with BOC abuse for a society just as it does with chemical abuse (or any of the other process addictions such as gambling, sex, food, internet use, etc.) for an individual. Here is a list of symptoms operating at the collective, social level that constitutes the classic profile of addiction. The (1) tolerance of negative effects that accompany industrialization, (2) dependency upon civilization’s benefits (rooted in denial), (3) progression (increased need for BOCs despite increasingly damaging environmental results), and (4) continued inappropriate use of BOCs in spite of lethal long-term consequences: tolerance, dependency, progression, and continued lethal use.

Indicators of an addicted collective
Using unsustainability (out of control use of resources) to assess for societal addiction reveals certain negative characteristics and outcomes such as: unmanageable social consequences and loss of control (of national economic, business, and social justice practices). These outcomes (unmanageability and loss of control) are used as diagnostic markers of a society suffering from a collective addiction, just as they are used when assessing an individual for addiction. How big are these markers today? Additionally, tolerance for social injustice, as explained below, can be used as another metric for the impact of a collective addiction.
In the individual, addiction impairs normal human growth and development, making addiction a serious developmental problem. Nationally, in the life of a young nation, we hope to see social justice become one of the core values, a developmental victory in the growth of a new nation. It follows then that social justice can be used as an indicator of the social maturation of a society. Knowing that addiction impedes healthy human growth and development at the individual level raises the concern that a collective addiction can impair our continued development as a nation.

Therefore, our industrialized society’s capacity to normalize (1) unsustainability and (2) injustice are used as indicators of social maturity, or the lack there of. A lack of national maturation in these areas indicates the presence of a developmental roadblock (such as an active addiction process would create). Our society today when seen through an unsustainability lens appears to be drunk on benefits of civilization. (It should be said that civilization, like alcohol, is morally neutral. It is not modernity or the use of BOCs that is the problem. It’s the abuse and misuse of the intoxicating power of modern civilization that creates social dilemmas.)

Development of a Healthy Nation

Civilizations and nation states rise and fall in history, indicating a lifecycle. The progress of America’s social development in its short history thus far is the question being examined.

Different fields of study use the term “development” differently. A behavioral health professional working as a clinician speaks of “human growth and development” when referring to the passage we take from infancy to old age. A successful maturation process is measured by the degree to which a person develops into the best version of the self, or self-actualizes (a highly valued western concept). A sociologist uses “development” differently when referring to twentieth century post-cold war nation states. The difference between a developed nation and a developing nation is self-evident by western standards. A nation today is considered developed according to the level of wealth and technology available to its citizenry. Generally, in a western worldview, countries such as the US are regarded as first world developed countries while other poorer, so-called less advanced countries (especially those not necessarily aligned with the west) are regarded as lagging behind in the third world and in need of catching up.

When cultural values specific to western society attempt to define for non-western societies what “developed” means and looks like, the discussion easily becomes pejorative in nature, placing western values over the values of other cultures. Consciously or unconsciously, cultural imperialism can come into play. Non-western and traditional cultures around the world get disrupted, even dismantled, by the process of modernization (a.k.a. modernization meaning “westernization”). It can foster ill feelings internationally, and the more dependent on technology we are, and therefore the more dependent we are on the resources of others, the easier it is to bully our way forward and say, “That’s progress. You can’t stand in the way of modern progress.” This is a dangerous sentiment when it gives permission to various forms of unjust, aggressive cultural and economic imperialism.

Impaired Progress

Industrialized, technologically advanced civilizations\(^1\) have developed so rapidly in world history (see figure 1 below) that humanity’s maturation processes have struggled to keep pace. This has happened in a world of nations plagued by long histories of social traumas. An unwanted result has been the normalizing of trauma in

\(^1\) see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilization#Fall_of_civilizations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilization#Fall_of_civilizations) for a description of “civilization”
national psyches around the world. This essay argues that unresolved social trauma can breed addiction in society itself, just as unresolved trauma can contribute to addiction in the individual person. Further, a society shaped by a culture of addiction (with its underlying untreated trauma) remains vulnerable to ongoing traumatic social turmoil. This setup impairs healthy personal and collective human growth and development. The cycle once set plays out from one generation to the next. The social maturation processes that are needed to empower us to grow, live wisely, and manage our technological power without harming others are thus impaired.

Addiction significantly arrests emotional maturation in the individual at approximately the age at which the addiction takes hold. It is at this point that thriving stops and surviving starts. Adults who suffer from an early onset of addiction oftentimes make decisions with the judgement of a child. Arrested development of judgement characterizes addict behavior. And addict behavior has consequences that are unfair and unjust for those around the addict. Addict behavior at the national level would be no different. Just as an individual with a DUI gets mandated for a drug and alcohol assessment, a nation plagued by the unjust consequences of immature social behaviors likewise needs an objective assessment. Metrics that assess for societal growth and development need to go beyond simply measuring the number of years of national existence or a nation’s technological power or its economic achievement. To assess for a society’s maturity it must be assessed along dimensions reflective of true growth and development of a human society. Things like how does a society treat its most vulnerable, its children, its elders, and in a male-dominant society like ours, its women? How does it exercise its political, economic, and military power—for its self-interest only or for the welfare of others as well? What kind of disparities of health and wellbeing are accepted in society and why? Is its use of resources and its treatment of the environment wise or foolish? National behaviors along these dimensions are on a spectrum. Where do we fall in the spectrum?

Looking at history through simple bi-causal lenses (sustainability versus unsustainability; justice versus injustice) is not done in this essay to advocate for a simplistic view of history, but is a teaching device to achieve clarity around several complex ideas: (1) that social trauma left untreated blocks societal maturation, (2) Blocked maturation results in significant and detrimental social consequences that repeat generationally, (3) that the societal maturation process needs an environment of social justice much like healthy personal development needs a healthy home environment, and (4) that a socially immature society is predisposed to a toxic kind of progress represented by things like unsustainability and unjust social practices.

The Problem of Societal Trauma

Generational trauma\(^2\), in which original trauma is transferred from first generation survivors to descendants through intergenerational complex PTSD dynamics, is recognized by mental health and substance abuse clinicians as a common theme in many of the clients they serve. Historical trauma (a specific form of generational trauma), recognized as such in the literature since the late 1980s, is also identified as a significant factor. Historical trauma impairs the wellbeing of a whole people group. It is perpetrated by a more powerful group upon a less powerful group. Its impact “compounds over time in the lifetime of an individual and expands across generational lines” according to Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, PhD. The concept of historical trauma has been studied as an ongoing after-effect of the Holocaust in the Jewish community\(^3\). Dr. Yellow Horse

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\(^2\) Also referred to as transgenerational and intergenerational trauma

\(^3\) See Rachel Yehuda, PhD, professor of psychiatry and neuroscience and the director of the Traumatic Stress Studies Division at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine and director of the Mental Health Patient Care Center at the James J. Peters VA Medical Center in New York City. Her research has been focused on epigenetics, Holocaust survivors, and pregnant survivors of 9/11 and their children.

http://www.echohawkcounseling.com/ehc-resource/articles/civilization-addiction-model/
Brave Heart applied the concept of historical trauma in the 1980s to her people of the Sioux Nations as part of her doctoral work.

Social trauma has been a theme throughout all of human history. Consistent with that indigenous peoples here in the United States and around the world have survived massive genocidal histories. A historical trauma lens provides a surprising insight into how this came to be in the US. Within the timeframe of our relatively recent history as a nation, immigrants coming to America typically suffered significant levels of trauma in their originating homelands. Immigrants left an Old World racked by a legacy of social trauma only to face oftentimes traumatic circumstances here in the so-called New World. European colonizing nation-states had deep histories with their own legacies of societal trauma. Trauma forged and shaped the very nature of colonialism. After centuries of Europe colonizing itself, colonization was an accepted norm along with its inherent violence. Bringing this violent behavior to the shores of the New World was not questioned.

It may at first be surprising and possibly unwelcome to hear historical trauma being applied to the colonizer as well as the colonized. It may sound like making excuses for past (and present) unacceptable behavior. It is not the norm to apply historical trauma to the people group holding the dominant power, in our case the Euro-American colonizers/settlers and their descendants. This application is made not to excuse anything, but rather to shift focus to the need for healing of all members of our society. If trauma is trauma, Euro-American descendants have layer upon layer of traumatic chapters stretching back in their histories, too. This is not to diminish the injuries done to indigenous people or to ignore the horrific human rights violations perpetrated under colonization and slavery. It is more to point out the tragic reality of how traumatized people have traumatized people throughout history.

There are two sides to this national coin. On one side is the traumatized, on the other is the traumatized traumatizer. Both need their own kind of healing to deal with their own kind of trauma. With this being so, we then as a nation must take full responsibility for our actions in history and in the present. Great resiliency has been shown by all people groups in the US in spite of longstanding challenges and adversity. Resiliency is important. Resiliency is a necessary part of the platform for going beyond survival to true healing. With that in mind, it is past time to use that resiliency and take seriously our responsibility for national healing for the sake of building a more just society.

To the point, when the problems we face (internally and internationally) as a modern nation-state are handled in the energy of a collective trauma-response instead of an appropriate, thoughtful response, the outcome can be destructive. Reactive trauma- responses to problems can be a means of perpetuating trauma generation after generation—domestically and abroad. The point of identifying and treating trauma is to interrupt the cycle and replace it with healing.

Justice at the Intersection of Progress and Sustainability

Sustainability is a necessary precondition for the ongoing wellbeing of a civilization. Sustainability also represents the sober use of the environment. Achieving environmentally just and sustainable practices are choices made by a stable, mature society. Furthermore, social concerns regulate the choices a society makes in how it uses its resources. Concerns for a more justice society shape a society’s ethic of the land.

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4 For a healing training program see: http://www.echohawkcounseling.com/ehc-resource/workshops/healing-generational-historical-trauma-training/ by this author
Correspondingly, in a dysregulated, addicted society appropriate and wise use of the land are seriously flawed by self-interest. Greed holds sustainability in low regard. Environmental harm gets downplayed, along with the accompanying social ills that affect the people that live in the land. Consequently, the destructive effects of unsustainability are accelerated in the absence of social justice\(^6\) and the presence of unresolved social trauma, no matter how deeply buried the trauma is from awareness. Under these conditions both people and environmental resources are at risk of ongoing misuse and abuse.

Civilization’s maturation processes remain disrupted and stunted when a society expects and demands advancements without accounting along the way for social healing and justice.

Today in the same Great Plains locale that was once all but destroyed by the Dust Bowl due to agricultural practices of greed, lack of environmental understanding, and mismanagement of the land, we are once again seeing new environmental catastrophes taking place. Currently there are daily man-made earthquakes throughout Oklahoma caused by oil and gas fracking and wastewater injection wells, permanently poisoning huge amounts of water. Also, vast amounts of water are being drained from natural aquifers on the Great Plains by big business agricultural irrigation systems much faster than can be naturally replenished—they will be drained down for many future generations. In California during its recent drought aquifers have been drained to the point that in areas the land has sunk down. Ecologically we are at the beginning of these new developments and others like them, and we have yet to fully appreciate the scope of the threats. Big business has not learned from the past, and by our complacency neither have we as society at large. This exemplifies dysregulated, immature social practices in action.

### Learning from History

By way of illustration, we can look at the progression from sustainable tribal horticultural practices that once existed in the US to the unsustainable agri-business practices of today. Unsustainable and socially harmful agri-business practices include a compilation of big money strategies used in intensive farming practices. These practices include the overuse of toxic chemicals harmful to consumers and the environment, the overuse of irrigation on lands naturally unsuited for the commercial crops being farmed, as mentioned, thereby draining huge aquifers, and other harmful practices. The progression from sustainable to unsustainable practices has had unintended but far reaching consequences\(^7\).

Historically horticulturalists sustained whole tribal groups using stone and bone based implements, technology in its basic form. A tribal population could exist indefinitely with access to a resourced

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\(^6\) See [http://www.echohawkcounseling.com/terms/](http://www.echohawkcounseling.com/terms/) at this author’s website, under “terms” for an unpacking of “justice”

\(^7\) Some of the outcomes of unsustainable practices are positive for the short-term but are outweighed by negative consequences in the long-run. More can be read about recent developments in agricultural practices by researching the
land base. The simple technology and the natural infrastructure for this organic way of life was self-regulating in many ways, including putting natural regulating dynamics on resource management and population overgrowth.

However, in time when the shoulder bone hoe was replaced by the iron plow (i.e., in the march of time when a so called “primitive” horticultural society advanced to an early-stage industrialized farming society, or was colonized into such a society) production increased. Things evolved. The intensive farmer displaced the horticulturist. One intensive farmer with a good team of mules and a metal plow could feed more people. This meant that a class of people could emerge that was freed for other pursuits (pursuits necessary to the existence of things like metal plows). The population grew. But note, these same people were not only dependent upon the more powerful farmer, they (including the industrialized farmer him or herself) no longer knew the skills necessary for the former, indigenous way of living. Knowledge was lost. Furthermore, the environment was changed. The infrastructure that was necessary for the former lifeway was lost, overwritten by deep changes in the physical environment. Sufficient populations of wild animals living in their natural habitat—habitat that was likewise wild, such as free running rivers for salmon, and open prairies with ancient prairie grasses that had evolved over the eons to survive the hard winters and long droughts—were gone. The indigenous environment looked unused and wasted to a new people geared by industrialism. So it was remade. The Industrial Revolution from the 1700’s on worked to transform irreversibly one type of infrastructure (a wild environment and ecosystem) into another type suited for industry (power grids, pipelines, mining and factories).

We live in a different world today. Industrialized civilization and its huge population has become dependent upon its technology. Technology bears the preponderant weight of its dependent population. If technology vital to infrastructure fails, its dependent human population will come crashing down. This is where we find ourselves today. We are in a modern society severely threatened by any disruptions in infrastructure, coupled with the growing power to adductively mine the environment for its resources faster than the environment can naturally replenish itself.

This disturbing predicament lies under a blanket of collective denial. Newer and newer developments are in higher and higher demand to sustain and grow the economy and its infrastructure. The hopes are for an even brighter future, however imperialistic it may need to be. Newly achieved levels of advancement, with every advent of higher technologies, are soon insufficient (as is characteristic of tolerance—you need more of the same substance to maintain the next high). Never mind the cost to the environment. This is another example of dysregulated collective addict thinking and behavior.

**Collective Tolerance and Withdrawal**

*Tolerance* is the ability to take in more and more of a substance and remain seemingly unaffected. *Dependency* is the need for a regular intake of a substance-of-use at an abnormally high level in order to remain “normal.” Without said intake withdrawal sets in. These two are synergistically related. Tolerance facilitates dependency and dependency builds tolerance ever higher. It’s a vicious cycle. The higher the tolerance the greater the dependency, and the greater the intake needs to be to get to the next high. Tolerance in a BOC addiction model means dependency upon the use of BOCs for everyday functioning. Indeed, in the presence of BOC dependency a collective with high BOC tolerance must consume its achieved level of BOCs to remain in a normal, secure state of mind. It becomes a matter of survival.

Advancing levels of civilization seem irreversible—no one wants to live without the benefits of progress once

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they have become embedded into a well ordered life. A life organized by BOCs means things like the use of cars and highways to get to well stocked grocery stores and to work at the urban jobs that drive industry, the use of cell phones and the internet to maintain the day to day connections we depend upon, a modern house to come home to warmed by energy supplied by the grid, a home complete with electrical appliances for the household and gasoline powered equipment for the yard, and access to modern high-tech medical care to keep us fit to work, etc. In the modern age we’re actually put at an unfair disadvantage without access to the basic BOCs of industry. Once our lives depend upon these things, to lose them could have serious, and in some scenarios possibly even life threatening consequences. In other words, an abrupt loss of BOCs would pitch us into a crisis of withdrawal.

On the dark side of tolerance, among other things, is the fear of withdrawal. An addict knows that the higher the tolerance the harder the fall, if the supply is abruptly cut off. In a model of BOC addiction a perceived threat to the functioning of infrastructure can set off big reactions on the social landscape. Early personal and social withdrawal symptoms can begin, such as a sudden lost sense of wellbeing potentially leading to outbursts of social fears and public insecurity. As the withdrawal process escalates collective panic or aggression can ensue. The situation can quickly turn drastic. In an addiction model, unmitigated withdrawal is serious business. Certain kinds of withdrawal symptoms are truly life-threatening. The nervous system goes into a state of riot. The same can be said of a social group in collective withdrawal from the sudden perceived or actual loss of access to important BOCs. Our basic instinct to riot can get triggered in an effort to avert an anticipated lethal BOC withdrawal. Think about the mayhem and public danger that’s triggered when panicked people are confronted with shortages at the gas pump or empty shelves at the grocery store during or after a time of crisis.

Collective Denial, the Earmark of Addiction

For modern life to continue on its current long-term trajectory (in spite of the growing list of disconcerting questions about sustainability) our continued participation in a culture of denial is necessary. If we’re honest, we all exercise some degree of denial. The voice of denial in addiction speaks in four voices, each voice getting progressively urgent in service to protecting the addiction\(^8\). The first layer of defense is the voice of simple denial of fact. The alcoholic’s version of denial of fact would be, “There is no problem with the way I drink.” A BOC-addicted culture might say collectively, “In spite of all the politically correct press, there is no real problem with how we use the environment.” If denial of fact fails, the next defensive wall is the denial of implications (not connecting the dots in order to bamboozle someone challenging the addiction). The alcoholic might say, for example, in regard to a developing liver problem, “There are many reasons people get sore livers. I just need to change my diet.” A BOC-addicted culture might say, at the point where signs are beginning to show in the environment, “The polar ice caps aren’t melting because of human activity. It’s nature’s way for climate patterns to shift up and down over geological time,” in frank denial of scientific consensus. If reality penetrates the denial of implication wall, there is the more blatant wall of denial of change (getting others to lower or drop their expectation of the addict to change). An alcoholic speaking from this level of denial might shift blame by saying, “Why would you expect me to change my drinking with all your hysterics and angry drama—about nothing?” A BOC-addicted collective might say, “There is no point in us making changes without other countries doing their part, too. They’re as bad or worse,” setting up a political environment favorable to the exploitation of natural resources. As a last line of defense for the addict who is still desperately trying to maintain his or her addiction, there is the remaining wall of denial of feelings\(^9\) (see footnote). At this stage of denial, if a culture’s denial

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\(^8\) See Robert Kearney, “Within the Walls of Denial: Conquering Addictive Behaviors” (1995)

\(^9\) “Denial of FEELINGS: This is the least conscious level of denial and the last line of defense between the person and
system continues to parallel that of an individual’s denial system, a culture collectively would no longer be making objective, rational decisions. It would look more like fiddling while Rome burns, or in this case, a nation of consumers fiddling while social justice conditions worsen and the environment sickens.

In an addicted society denial keeps the wheels of unchecked industry lubed and turning. Certainly there are growing voices sounding the alarms and there are those activists that are making a difference. But as a whole the culture lacks the collective will to make the radical changes needed now. It is said that an alcoholic won’t change until he or she hits bottom. It seems that way for a culture, too. If change doesn’t come until we as a culture are on the brink, then apparently we have yet to hit bottom.

It remains to be seen if the new, more environmentally friendly technologies of the future can fix the problems of industrialization. It does smack of denial to hope that the problems driven by modern technology will be fixed by modern technology, but we can hope. One thing seems clear, there is no way to change the industrial practices and infrastructure of the modern life we currently enjoy without a willingness to sacrifice BOC’s in some manner. If the soothing voice of denial weaves a trap (and it does), then we’re all in it together.

Progression (increasingly lethal side effects)
To continue the theme from “Learning from History” above, there are very real economic pressures bearing down on people to advance with the times. If we don’t advance with the times we fall behind. Our ability to compete is compromised. Failure and deprivation can descend upon those who get left behind. But the processes of industry continue even though the environmental and social side effects get more and more destructive (hence, progression of disease).

Small family farmers today find themselves competing with big business farming. Large scale industrial farming requires machinery that costs hundreds of thousands of dollars, creating debt burdens that are crushing. “Green Revolution” farming\(^\text{10}\) is a must if you want your farming operation to compete. More and more, once viable small family farms that were passed down from one generation to the next are getting assimilated into big business farming.

The ever faster turning wheels of civilization create environmental potentials that did not exist in so-called primitive society. Consequently, the world’s population has more than doubled, growing exponentially by billions in my lifetime (see figure 1, above). This has not happened apart from the industrialization of the last few centuries of human history. On the grand scale of time this has happened in the blink of an eye. Humanity hasn’t had time to adjust to its new powers. In a sense, this new power to change the environment is in the hands of children. Environmental limits are now more readily reached and exceeded by immature civilized societies in denial of the consequences. The lack of maturity in a society’s collective judgement and behavior leaves the door open to the worst of human nature taking charge and setting agendas.

Exceeding natural limits invariably leads to destructive environmental conditions and, not surprisingly,
destructive social conditions. Dynamics of greed and denial go hand in hand producing a growing list of lethal social side effects. Enduring social conditions rooted in ill-gotten wealth, the exercise of unjust power and privilege over others as a sign of success, inhumanity and routine wars of aggression for territories and resources, economic policies undergirded by racism that insures unjust disadvantage for the marginalized and unjust advantage for the privileged, and the like, create a cultural atmosphere of normalized abuse. These abuses aren’t normal; they’re traumatizing. Without justice to regulate the power of civilization, society fails to provide for the wellbeing of all its members, to say nothing of caring for the environment. The collective breaks down into braided streams of societal immaturity, rife with the potential for violence.

In a dysregulated and addicted society, the need for BOC’s is blind to long term consequences. If just processes fail to regulate human behavior—with social justice being a requisite for and an expression of social maturity—a socially immature society is at risk of self-destructive outcomes. It is this author’s hope that disastrous environmental destruction with tragic consequences of human suffering need proceed no further for human activity to rebalance itself with nature. Hopefully we can avoid a truly sad case of “hitting bottom,” as AA puts it in the recovery world.

Summary
When an unjust society feeds the machine in ways that the environment cannot sustain while everyone benefiting from so-called civilization complacently looks the other way, denial is engrained into the fabric of society. We are trapped by modernity seemingly with no realistic way out. Denial protects unjust social practices and keeps us stuck on a self-destructive course. We become a society “drunk on civilization,” a society anesthetized by the benefits of civilization stumbling down the road of unsustainability—unless there is a major course correction. Today’s uninspected collective participation in unsustainable social practices helps to create a culture of good people who would like to live in a more sober manner but “can’t quit.” No one wants to “detox” (migrate from unsustainability to sustainability). It’s too painful. It means giving up something at great cost to the way we live. Even then, can it really be done while averting a dramatic loss in the world’s human population?

Facing addiction at the social level also means squarely facing a history of injustice and the underlying unresolved, unrecognized trauma that is an ever present source of sabotage blocking social maturation. We are at a cross-roads. Are we to continue our path unchanged or do we chose a difficult, seemingly impossible, but higher road into the future?

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