

Commentary:

## Exploding Energy Myths

by Mike Nickerson

How do we explode the myths and misconceptions about energy? The presentations and discussions at CACOR's Energy Symposium in June focused on the myth of abundant energy. As the papers showed, this myth is false and leads toward great danger.

During the presentations another energy myth was expressed and was apparently accepted without challenge. I question it here and then go on to offer a story which speaks to energy and expectations in the genre of mythology.

At the symposium it was stated that everything people do requires energy. In the broadest sense this is true, but the implication was that everything people do takes energy that must be generated from fossil fuels or an alternative source. In our industrial, product-focused age this is a widespread illusion. It was not the case before the industrial revolution, however, and it need not be so now. What people do, does not require a great deal of fossil fuel or alternative energy. What they choose to do with machines does.

Before the industrial revolution, most of what people did was powered by the metabolic energy provided by their food. The amount of this energy that individuals need is relatively unchanged no matter how we spend our time. We can focus on using machines and consuming goods produced by machines or we can exercise the potentials that come with being human. Metabolic energy and our human potentials tend to be eclipsed by our fascination with mechanical power. If we could again preoccupy ourselves with life-based activities instead of focussing on activities based on machines and the products that they produce, personal satisfaction would mushroom and our material impact on the Earth would decrease dramatically.

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encapsulates life-based pursuits. It encompasses relationships of all sorts, study, understanding, creativity, dance, sport, music, philosophical discussion, and appreciation of the wonders of existence. Once the material necessities for healthy life are attained, investing one's time in life-based pursuits is inherently more satisfying than material consumption. Not much money can be made from activities that anyone can enjoy for free - so you won't hear them advertised - but friendship and creativity are the real thing.

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Since materialism has become the dominant religion of technological society it requires an exercise of the imagination in order to believe that people can live on a fraction of the material resources that we presently believe are necessary. Please indulge your imagination and picture the essence of this life-based option. It is the missing link between our present reality and a sustainable future.

Humans are an incredibly gifted species. We have far more to work with in terms of our ability to perceive, comprehend, create, co-operate and adapt than any other creature. We have what it takes to live well on Earth for as long

as the sun shines. If the Cornucopian and Malthusian projections in John McRuer's scenarios both lead to collapse, we owe it to posterity to investigate other variables that can be altered. If attachment to 'standard of living' as defined by the amount of material we consume is threatening civilization, it is worth looking elsewhere for satisfaction.

Recent evidence supports the perspective that people can live on minimal material resources. Consider the defenders of Kosovo, Afghanistan and Vietnam. In each of these wars it was demonstrated that people

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## Better Than We Think / Worse than We Fear

As is always the case, in some respects things are better than we think and in other respects they may be worse than we fear. In the November issue of *Queen's University Alumni Review* there is a fascinating and exciting story entitled "Fuel For Change." For over 20 years, Dr. Geoffrey Ballard has pioneered the development of an environmentally friendly alternative to the fossil fuel internal combustion engine. His pollution free hydrogen powered fuel cell produces potable water as its only by-product. Zero-emission vehicles such as Ballard Fuel Cell powered buses in Chicago and Vancouver are now being tested. Daimler-Chrysler, Ford and other partners have purchased 35% of Ballard's company with the goal of marketing fuel cell cars within five years. For Ballard, the move from fossil fuel economy to hydrogen based economic is a given. The only question is the form of the fuel – methanol, methane or hydrogen.

The website [www.oilcrisis.com](http://www.oilcrisis.com) features among other things testimony given by Colin Campbell to the British parliament concerning the impending oil crisis. Campbell believes the peak in fossil fuel production is within two to five years, much closer than other researchers. He bases his theory on fossil fuel reserves that are corrected for date of discovery rather than date of reporting the reserves. The web-site presents a wealth of historical data and breadth of information concerning the future of fossil fuels. Other web-sites of interest are: [www.hubbertpeak.com](http://www.hubbertpeak.com) , [www.iea.org](http://www.iea.org), [www.ectopia.com](http://www.ectopia.com), [www.icta.org/projects](http://www.icta.org/projects) .

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In each of these wars it was demonstrated that people don't really need much to lead effective lives. Most of the sophisticated systems that many people think of as essential are really just complex ways of providing convenience. When super powers attack, their enormous physical power can destroy most of the material infrastructure in a country, yet the people are remarkably undeterred. As long as they have food, good small arms, and a sense of purpose, they are able to continue defending their territories.

The same ability to follow our purpose with a minimum of material consumption is possible in a peaceful situation. We could keep the waterworks, shelters, hospitals, libraries and communications networks. Rather than carrying guns and fighting, our purpose would be to share the tasks of mutual provision and to enjoy living. Such a lifestyle is a practical solution at a time when our material demands are dangerously undermining the Earth's ability to provide for us.

I look forward to discussing this life-based scenario with CACOR members. In the mean time, I offer the following story as a tool for inscribing awareness of the energy challenge in popular consciousness.

## The Music of the Motors

Listen. Can you hear the music of the motors? - It is the sound of cars and trucks, planes, lawnmowers and all manner of engines powered by the finite energy of fossil fuels. It can be heard almost everywhere. Civilization plays musical chairs to this music.

The chairs in this analogy are dealt with differently than in the party game, however. In the party game a chair is removed with each round of the game. In the world game, we can make more chairs as we dance. The 'chairs' in this case are the available capacity for supporting people within sustainable bounds. While the music of the motors plays, we can build domestic ecosystems and other sustainable life-supporting systems. The number of chairs we have depends on the extent to which we apply our enormous creative abilities and our present mechanical strength to producing them.

When the music of the motors stops, how many chairs will there be? Where will you and your offspring be? How many people will be able to sit on the chairs that last without the motors?

Listen for the music of the motors. Don't let it go unnoticed. When it penetrates your consciousness remember that we are in a dance upon which the fate of civilization depends.