

AMERICA IS SNORTING CHEAP ENERGY LIKE AN ADDICT SNORTS COCAINE

By Scott Thompson

“We live in a nation of fossil fuel junkies, very sweet people and the best hearts in the world. But nonetheless fossil fuel junkies.” - Gary Snyder, 1976

I have been a drug and alcohol counselor for almost twenty-five years. Here in southern West Virginia, where I practice, the addicts prefer opiate pain pills (Lortab, Oxycontin, and so forth), alcohol, cocaine, and marijuana. Not far to the north there's much more methamphetamine (or so I hear).

Our culture's drugs of addiction are oil, coal, and, to a lesser extent, natural gas.

But addicts aren't simply addicted to their drugs of choice, despite what they may claim. What they're addicted to is getting high. From which they derive unspeakably intense pleasure.

The brain chemistry involved is now reasonably well known. All addictive drugs artificially stimulate the brain neurotransmitter dopamine, associated with pleasurable feelings, to levels vastly greater than the brain evolved to provide. Consequently, addiction can be seen as systematic pillaging of the pleasure center of the brain. Addicts will always – a strong word! – admit that they are in love with gettin' high. Even if they get and stay sober, their love remains.

America is addicted to cheap energy, vast quanta of energy relative to cost, which it gets in spades from fossil fuels. With that energy we fuel our so-called “American Dream,” heedlessly consuming petroleum, coal, and other natural resources in the process.

Collectively, we derive enormous pleasure and satisfaction from promoting and pursuing this vision, which has come to define us: an ambience of acquisitiveness and pressured economic expansion that is singularly exciting, pleasurable, fascinating, overblown, frenetic, and crazily entertaining. It is our beloved, culture-wide dopamine spree. Gary Snyder nailed it in 1976 when he said that America was “still caught on the myth of the frontier, the myth of boundless resources and a vision of perpetual materialistic growth. Now that is all very bad metaphysics, a metaphysics that is bringing us to ruin.” (The Real Work, p.69.)

Addicts come to see their lifestyles as normal. After all, people they know, let's see, drink up to a case of beer on Friday nights, or snort pain pills, or might tote a pistol in case someone crosses them in a cocaine deal. Over time the straight life becomes surreal to them; they dread harnessing themselves to a routine that isn't broken up by drug highs.

What you tell addicts about this is that exploiting their brain dopamine has over time become their sole way of feeling good; that they don't realize that they've lost the other, more subtle feelings of satisfaction they had before the addiction took hold. Such as talking with a close friend, walking in the desert or the mountains, painting, reading, or writing. The subtle natural highs the human brain has evolved over millennia to bolster healthy behaviors.

The monks got us up well before 6 a.m. Everyone sat in silent meditation together for an hour, then chanted 14th century Buddhist scriptures for another hour – the same scriptures without fail. Although they were translated into English, I found them incomprehensible. “Don't worry about what they mean,” the monks said, “just chant.” Afterward we cleaned toilets and swept floors for an hour; after that we had a silent communal breakfast; after that we had several hours of manual labor in the garden, goat house, or straightening old nails; after that we had a silent communal lunch; after that there were several more hours of manual labor; after that we had a silent communal supper; after that we had a rest period; after that we sat again in silent meditation together, this time for an hour and a half; after that we all chanted another, shorter set of indecipherable Buddhist scriptures; after that we non-monastic guests assembled for our half hour evening tea. It was supervised by one of the monks, who kept the talk pleasantly social, forbidding gossip (except for the doings of the cats and dogs), personal dramatics, griping, or philosophizing.

I found the lack of stimulation excruciating. It became steadily more horrible, and after a month I thought I would literally die of boredom. At that point I decided to give it up and begin my long drive back to Texas the next day; I maneuvered a phone call to my girlfriend to tell her so. After the call I returned to digging my assigned series of trenches. Half an hour later the noxious boredom that had built up inside me popped like a bubble. Amazed and relieved, I dug and dug.

No shit – since that moment I have never felt truly bored.

During the month that followed, the days in the monastery flowed so smoothly into one another that I don't recall distinct moments of either discontentment or pleasure. At the same time there was subtle sweetness in everything I saw or heard or did; so subtle that I was hardly conscious of it.

Over a thousand years ago Zen monasticism emerged through melding Indian Buddhist meditation traditions with the flow of Chinese peasant life; which itself was based upon hours of silent manual labor each day: a slower, a more grounded, and a more traditional way of life by far than our own. I left the monastery convinced that these young American and British monks understood something important, and that most of what my culture had taught me about what was necessary for a contented life was bullshit.

I also came to believe that the developed countries of the world are indeed, as Gary Snyder wrote in 1974, “living in a kind of addict's dream of affluence, comfort, [and] eternal progress, using the great achievements of science to produce software and swill.” (A Place in Space, p.39.)

A trustworthy indicator of drug addiction is continued use in spite of destructive consequences, such as losing jobs, drunk driving arrests, financial ruin, or convictions for theft, robbery, drug dealing, or marijuana cultivation. And most importantly, because this is always a feature of the addiction, serious damage to close personal relationships: divorce, break-ups (actual or threatened), and alienation from children and parents.



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Then you tell them they'll need roughly 6-9 months of sobriety for the dopamine imbalance to heal itself, and that if they do actually stay sober that long they'll begin to notice that the subtle pleasures of daily life are returning. But that until then the journey will be a colossal struggle with mood swings, sleeplessness, and a gruesome boredom that will cloak everything they try to do.

A story now. In 1976, when I was 28, I spent two months in a Zen monastery in northern California. It had about 30 monks, male and female, and usually had five to ten non-monastic guests, of which I was one.

There was a rule of silence every day until the evening tea just before bedtime. There was no television, no pizza, and there were no weekend passes. Telephone calls were scrupulously restricted. The food was vegetarian and good. The monks shaved their heads according to Buddhist tradition, and wore robes down to their ankles. That and the strict dress code for non-monastic guests blunted sexual stimulation. One of our work tasks was straightening used, bent nails for the monks on the construction crew because the monastery couldn't afford to buy new nails. Nor could it afford to heat the rooms above 58 degrees Fahrenheit.

When I was learning to be a drug and alcohol counselor it was believed that most addicts didn't quit using because they were in denial of their addictions. “Denial is not a river in Egypt,” as they said. I have come to believe, however, that people typically know they're addicted; they simply choose to keep gettin' high as long as the immense pleasure they derive from it exceeds their distress over it systematically shattering their lives. Not infrequently only death stops them: typically by overdose, organ failure, cirrhosis, car crash, or murder; the avenues are many.

The destructive consequences to the natural world, and ultimately to ourselves, from our collective addiction to cheap energy have been obvious for half a century. In 1974, for instance, Gary Snyder wrote, “Humanity's careless use of ‘resources’ and its total dependence on certain substances such as fossil fuels (which are being exhausted, slowly but certainly) are having harmful effects on all the other members of the life network.” (A Place in Space, p.38.) Congress did show foresight in passing the Wilderness Act of 1964, and in the 1970s when it passed the Endangered Species Act and noteworthy amendments to the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. But then came the Reagan Regression, during which corporate money swallowed up members of Congress like pythons

swallowing up rabbits.

In 1988 the eminent NASA climatologist James Hansen famously testified to Congress that global warming was outright dangerous. In response, Congress did nothing. In late 2005 Hansen asserted that if humanity continues its business-as-usual CO₂ emissions we can expect catastrophic sea level rises, the extinction of a large fraction of the planet's plant and animal species, and the melting of glaciers supplying river water to untold millions, especially in Asia. Deeply concerned, the Bush administration resorted to Soviet-style tactics in an effort to intimidate and silence him. Congress did nothing.

In December, 2007, Hansen determined that the planet's level of CO₂, then 385 parts per million, was already dangerously high and that a safe level is 350 ppm or less. And was soon backed up by colleagues. The House of Representatives did respond: by passing an unworkable cap and trade bill that toadied to the near-term interests of coal and power companies. We could thank the Senate for doing what it usually does in such essential matters – nothing - but that's like thanking an addict for drinking as much vodka as usual.

The current atmospheric CO₂ level is 390 ppm.

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When addicts do finally accept that their drugs of choice have become overwhelmingly destructive, they typically resort to switching drugs. The illusion they pursue at this point is that there must be a drug out there that will allow them to keep gettin' high without horrifying consequences.

They have two classical strategies. The historic one is giving up liquor or other drugs in favor of beer. In this case the addict's mirage is that beer will somehow be a "safe" drug for him, even when he's been plainly informed that many if not most alcohol addicts are primary beer drinkers. He thinks, Yeah, but I'm not like them, I can handle it. Drug and alcohol counselors call this "terminal uniqueness."

The second strategy, more favored in recent decades, is switching to marijuana. The question you ask the addict is, Are you gonna smoke it every day? You usually get a blank look in response, because addicts assume that toking weed on a daily basis is what normal people do. When you point out that extended daily marijuana use is consistent with addiction¹, your addict says, Well, everybody I know smokes it like that. And you say, That's probably because your friends are addicts. You can imagine the route the conversation takes from there.

What addicts are trying to avoid by switching drugs, of course, is a paradigm shift in how they live and the way they think; exactly what's necessary to adapt to a life that offers subtle rather than wired-up pleasures.

Sometimes, though, the paradigm shift does happen. The crazy thing is you never know beforehand within whom the inner explosion will occur, and least of all when. What you do know is that when addicts get clean & sober, really do it, they're often among the sweetest and most spiritually advanced people on the planet.

Back to our collective addiction. If we keep on gettin' high on cheap energy, continuing our slide toward cultural dissolution, we may very well try switching drugs. From oil, coal, and natural gas to, let's say, wind and solar; imagining that they will be our "safe drugs." But barfing up enough energy to keep the system glittering and growing will take mas-

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sive arrays of heavily capitalized, corporate wind farms; thousands of hulking great wind turbines, shattering what continuity and resonance still remain in our landscape. As well as industrial-sized solar facilities spread across our Western deserts, obliterating fragile desert ecosystems. Switching drugs to perpetuate our addiction to cheap energy will only escalate "the blind destruction for the sake of greed of this natural paradise which lies all around us – if only we were worthy of it," as Edward Abbey said. (Desert Solitaire, p. 167.)

Wind and solar will become key energy sources in any case, but if we get clean & sober we will use them on a much more modest scale than we ever used fossil fuels. That would be a marker of our sobriety.

Currently, American society can be compared to an alcohol addict who has just been told by his doctor, one James Hansen, that his liver enzymes are elevated and that if he doesn't quit drinking, and soon, his condition will worsen into cirrhosis and he will die. After receiving this grim warning, he cruises over to his favorite watering hole, The Dreamscape Lounge, and knocks down five shots of Jack Daniels with beer backs. As he sits in the cool ambience of the bar, he meditates on his situation. Maybe the doc is right, he thinks. Maybe I should cut back on my drinking. He takes a swallow of draft beer, feeling the golden fluid sliding down his throat, and then he nods. You know, maybe I can cut back to just beer.

Then he orders another shot of Jack.

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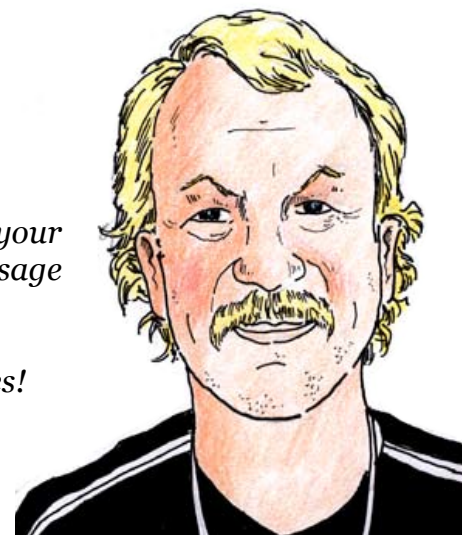
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