

## Chapter One: Rethinking Our Cultural Myths

*Excerpt from HOME, Choosing Humanity's Future by Ruth L. Miller*

“There is only one way to change our story, and that is by changing what we believe about ourselves.”

~ Don Miguel Ruiz

Many of the issues of our lives today stem from our beliefs about the world in general, and our society in specific. If we can identify some of the misunderstandings that have got us to this point, we can begin to develop the alternatives that will move us beyond it.

### Scarcity of Resources

For centuries of empire culture we've been taught from birth that there's not enough to go around, that a few people get to have a lot and the rest of us have to get by, and that it takes hard work and careful management to have enough to get by on. We've been chided for any tendency or expressed desire to spend time playing or to live by our creative abilities on the grounds that we have to “earn a living” and “be responsible citizens (and consumers).” Most of us accept this as an accurate description of “the real world” and do our best within its limitations. Many of us turn our back on it and do without rather than give in to such a sad life. A few of us find a way to ignore it and live well any way.

The fact that it's possible for some people to live well without playing by the cultural norms or rules says something very important. It's telling us that those norms and rules are not real! If some of us can live another way, then those rules do not describe the only way we can live!

Once we accept that possibility, then all kinds of options open up. Some of those possibilities may lead to some discomfort, as we try different ways of being, but after a while we can find the way through. We can live a comfortable life without causing distress to ourselves, our neighbors, or the planet. Today, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more and more people are discovering this fact and sharing it – online, in books, and simply by the example of their lives.

In another book, *Making The World Go Away*, I lay out the process by which we can get past those cultural norms and live a life that nourishes our hearts and souls. In this book, we'll look at the how-tos of a comfortable, sustainable way of life that nourishes the planet and our own beings, as well.

The fact is, there is plenty for everyone to have everything they need to live comfortably without having to work hard for someone else's profit. Those corporate-capitalist days were short and brutal and are nearly over, as more and more people realize that most of what the past few generations were taught as facts, are actually mythic theories attempting to make sense of incomplete data based on faulty assumptions. The next few chapters will explore some of those theories and their assumptions.

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## The Utopian Ideal

In the late 1400s, all of Europe was suffering. Centuries of the Inquisition had killed off nearly all the women who had nursed the sick, helped with childbirth, or understood natural cycles and processes. Population density was high and hygiene was minimal, at best. Whole villages would catch a fever and die; whole governments could be wiped out by illness in a matter of days. In spite of the Renaissance era's discoveries of ancient Greek and Roman ideas, the Roman Catholic church dominated not only religious life, but intellectual and political life in most places. For centuries, only monks had been trained to read or write, and they were allowed only religious texts. Monasteries and abbeys controlled much of the land. Kings and queens held the throne only as long as they were supported by the landholders they served- including the Roman Church.

It was in that context that Henry VIII's ambassador to Brussels, Sir (now Saint) Thomas More, wrote a revolutionary book, called *Utopia*. It was revolutionary in several ways. First of all, there had not been such a book since Plato: a presentation of an ideal society as if it were real and had been experienced by someone known to the author. Second, it presented a society that was based far more on the ideas of Plato than those of the Church – on reason, rather than Revelation. Third, it presented those ideas in such a way that only a very few could perceive the critique of current conditions that underlay the image being presented.

The term *utopia* was a play on words. It means both "a good place" (*eu-topis*) and 'no place' (*un-topis*), or 'nowhere.' It was, perhaps, this very *double entendre* – along with many other such humorous word-plays – that saved More from being burned as a heretic at the time of publication.<sup>1</sup>

For until that time, the Church held that this life, in this body, on this world, was simply a forerunner of one's true life, after death, in the hereafter. People were taught that their proper concern should not be the betterment of life here and now, but in the everlasting hereafter. They were expected to "earn" a good life after death through acceptance, forgiveness, penance, and tithes. The Church did not condone social improvements.

The Greek and Roman philosophers, however, had been very concerned with how life should be lived, for its own sake, and for the betterment of all (that is to say, all males who held rank and property). Their ideas had been circulating since the European Renaissance, with varying degrees of approval. Sir Thomas, being a student of the Erasmus, managed to combine mystical insight with the essential teachings of Plato and his followers in language church leaders could live with. He presented an image of society in which life was reasonably healthy and comfortable for everyone – and so set a goal for centuries to come.

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<sup>1</sup>More was later executed for refusing to sign a document that declared Henry VIII head of the Church in England. Revered as a martyr for the Catholic faith for centuries, More was declared a saint in 1935.

### *Building the Utopian Dream*

Since that time, as a result of More's book and many other, less directly alternative thinkers, western civilization has been concerned with "progress," which is to say improving technology, society, and the quality of life for all of its members. The New World and its riches were hailed as resources to improve the lot of "Everyman." The Industrial Revolution was hailed as a "Fountain of Plenty" for all. The political revolutions of the 1700s and 1800s, in which feudal monarchies were replaced with constitutional republics (with and without royalty) were declared to be the culmination of Western culture's utopian drive.

By the late 1800s and early 1900s, the middle classes of Western Europe and the Americas were certain Utopia had arrived. Under Queen Victoria and her son Edward, British middle-class values and expectations were spread across the planet. Travel was relatively easy; there was plenty of frontier for the young and restless sons of civilization to explore and conquer, and there were plenty of resources for them to find new and interesting ways to use.

It took the horrors of the World Wars to shake this comfortably optimistic perception. And in the wars' aftermath, the propaganda lessons learned during those dark days were turned toward "improving" the economy and society through technology. "Madison Avenue" was invented, and with its emergence, "progress" became "our most important product."

### *Advertising's Role*

The goal of an advertising campaign is to make one dissatisfied with what one has and want something different. A successful campaign is one that changes the buying habits of thousands of people---ideally, 10-30% of a population. A really successful campaign is one that convinces people who have never needed something that, not only do they need it, they cannot now function without it. (One example is disposable diapers, which no one could be persuaded to pay for until the producers gave them to hospitals to use and send home with new mothers; today, most parents wouldn't even think of using

Effectively, then, the "industry" of advertising has as its goal the prevention of satisfaction. So, as long as there is advertising, there can be no experience of Utopia.

The result is that, in America, the highest quality of life ever experienced by any culture in history was achieved in the early 1960s and nobody knew it! We were all so busy listening to advertisements telling us how much better life was going to be that we didn't stop and appreciate what we had.

And, contrary to popular opinion, we've been going downhill ever since. Measured in such terms as literacy rates, infant mortality rates, healthcare availability, access to public services and transportation, stress levels, and leisure time, our quality of life today is lower than it was in 1982, lower than in 1972, and considerably lower than it was in 1962.

There is a larger spread between the "haves" and the "have-nots." There are more children in poverty. Fewer people control more of the capital. More people work longer hours for less real pay. And so on.

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The Utopian dream, that through invention, expansion, and accumulation, things will be better for the next generation, has driven our culture for 500 years. Many things are much better. Too many others are not. But we are still driven by our belief in the ideal, and the possibility, that sometime, somewhere, life can be perfect, if we just keep doing what we're doing – better, harder, and more efficiently.

### The End (Stable)-State Corollary

Most of us have been raised to believe that if we work hard in school we'll be able to get a "good job" and live a comfortable life "ever after." Then we get that job and discover that, to live at a level beyond subsistence, we must work hard and get promoted.

Then we get promoted and discover we must work hard to keep from falling behind. We keep this up, in the belief that after a couple of decades we can retire – and then everything will be wonderful. Until the kids (or our parents!) move back in or someone gets sick or our pension plan fails or . . .

The idea that there is some point "out there" in the future when everything will be wonderful has always underlain corporate-capitalist culture. It motivates many people to behave in culturally acceptable ways. It is, however, a myth. And, as a myth, it may not be an accurate portrayal of how the universe works. ...