

## Time Warps, Opposites, Extremes

Written by Alex Baer

Saturday, 20 October 2012 22:30 - Last Updated Saturday, 20 October 2012 22:51

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The longer our country's history, the faster and more extreme we become, tearing off into all directions at once. Even as we progress and go forward, it seems, we can grow in opposite directions -- while trying to juggle and reconcile our parallel lines, already skewing to the extreme, pointed and going *everywhichway* at once.

Some extremes may be related to the increased population effect you've noted from time to time, in which it seems there are thousands of people in every conceivable hobby or belief group, from The Intercontinental Plaid-Toaster-Cozy Aficionados to The Society of Tap-Dancing Proust Performance Artists.

Where there once were one or two fans, population swelled membership by the same percentages and proportions as the population grew, increasing numbers in all ranks, no matter how obscure. The Internet's made it easier to find one another and band together in groups, too.

It's happened remarkably fast, considering the humble speed of progress throughout most of human history. The last century or so is not even a galloping horse alongside someone's shambling stroll -- it's a rocket up against a stalled millipede.

For a small taste, sample some old movies. (If you're an old movie buff you'll already know what I mean.) Take one at random from the late 1920s or 1930s. I'll bet you bogged down in time-flow, mired in molasses, and trapped in amber -- and in nothing flat. It takes a very patient member of the 21st century to not mutter or scream at the screen, "*C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, already!*"

If you're already in the time flow, things become relative, perhaps in an Einsteinian way -- difficult to notice, until you step out of it and try to look back in. There are all sorts of estimates of how fast information is doubling and tripling in such-and-such months and years, wild guesses that grow shorter each day. But, speed of change, however amazing or fleet, is ultimately measured by human interaction in the end, just to make some sense of things.

One example: My parents were quite old before I was born, and my dad older than my mom. In

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the range of his 86-year life, he went from horse-drawn trolleys in the streets of the early 1900s, to men standing on the moon, and beyond. That's a lot of ground to cover in just one lifetime. I cannot imagine such leaps and bounds occurring in my own, or anyone else's -- pending some world-changing, life-altering invention yet to arise.

Be careful what you wish for, it is said. One such leap forward may be happening now, with an idea to make fuel, right out of thin air. This may sound a lot like the infamous pill which makes gasoline when it's added to water, but research is underway in the UK.

A few hazy questions circle my head: This trick requires energy to pull off. Even if the power needed is from a renewable source, can they get enough energy back out, to justify the energy they're putting in? Are we so in love with fossil fuels -- and potentially-synthesized derivatives -- that we're bogged down here? Or, is this just a temporary technological plateau, where we catch our breath, before moving on to -- Oh, I don't know -- *fuel cells recharged just by simple exposure to sun or wind?*

A crystal ball would be a luxury, perhaps as frightening as it is fascinating. No telling what new, brutal extremes of war humanity's cooked up, threatening to set us back again, or what may have been learned and found to help move us forward. We should not ponder too long. *There is that adage of not staring too long into the abyss -- lest it stare back into you.*

Possibilities abound: How about a planet with four suns yanking it this way and that? *No, already located, and by volunteers.*

A planet made of diamonds, then?

*Nope, already found one, twice the size of Earth.*

Another planet closer to our solar system than a hundred bazillionteen light years from Earth?

*Nah, already got one, sort of, just four light years away.*

It goes on, closer to home: Maybe we'll find out more someday about how our own moon was formed? *Too late - a done deal. □ It may have even helped slow Earth's rotation enough to allow life to form and evolve here.*

LA's teeny, tree-rimmed, side streets?

*already happened, too.*

All right, how about rolling a space shuttle down

*Sorry, that's*

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*On that last one, many mixed emotions and regrets , resulting from a collision of affections in space and science, and ecology and trees: □ As many as 400 trees came down in order to make way for the shuttle's transit there. □ This event breeds an extreme-but-accurate-seeming adage, one summarizing all human achievement as being crowned with constant loss -- the ultimate price of admission and possible gain.*

Again, more opposites and extremes: How about research showing creativity and mental illness might be next-door neighbors? *Yes, it's been done.* OK, then -- how about these: A couple maddened by beeping sounds who tore out walls looking for the source? Passive-aggressive wi-fi naming? A soldier, surprised to give birth while deployed in a war zone? Sandwiches in a can? Yes,  
*yes, yes, and yes. □ All old hat.*

Humans seem to always be on a roll, for good or ill: Millionaires getting unemployment checks while two-thirds of Americans live check-to-check. An 18-pound onion. A war machine able to fire 18,000 rounds a minute -- parking a round every 2.4 yards (in a 3-second burst) over an area 52 yards in diameter. A cancer-killing virus.

Learning the *why* is usually more difficult than learning the *what*, when it comes to human affairs. Like the country that may have to import more garbage. Or the Christian televangelist who advises a switch to Islam, so a wife may be legally beaten. Or the rise of tribalism and Maori tatoos. Or the skydiver who went faster than the speed of sound.

And, of spectacular acts of plummeting, this: A report says the total cost of the Wall Street greed-binge, that caused the loss of millions of jobs during the financial crisis, could now amount to almost 13 trillion dollars. (U.S. GDP is 15 trillion a year, by comparison.)

If you enjoy contemplating the *why*, try this pair on for size: *Why* is no-one in jail after the Wall Street heists? (An exception may be Bernie Madoff, but only because he stole from the rich, not from regular folk, like the banksters.)

*Why*

is no-one in jail yet for the Iraq war, either?

Back to the smaller matters: A new finding says success is mostly in your name. And there's a

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San Francisco apartment actually cheap enough to afford -- something apparently rarer than a hack-proof voting machine. And, speaking of which, here's an old favorite, for humor relief -- a new Florida voting machine, with 600 levers!

Or this one, also in the painfully amusing category: a dog accidentally shot his person in the face with a shotgun -- *shades of The Dick Cheney Dog Training Academy!*

Around and around we go, the human penchant for opposites and extremes silently working our orbits, playing with time. Once more: It helps to step outside one's world, just to look back in and make sense of things.

So, from that view and angle, a rest from mundane, terrestrial affairs is on tap: Five minutes and 55 seconds in all, in a guided slide show, a tour of entries from the Astronomy Photographer of the Year competition.

Link's down below. Here's hoping you find it sensational, and very sensible, too. *And, good luck, looking back in.*

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*Today's samplers and buffet:*

Fuel from air: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/energy/fuel/9619269/British-engineers-produce-amazing-petrol-from-air-technology.html>

Four suns: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-19950923>

Diamond Planet:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/11/us-space-diamond-planet-idUSBRE89A0PU20121011>

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Four light years: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-19959531>

-and-

<http://www.space.com/18099-earth-sized-planet-alpha-centauri-numbers.html>

Moon formation: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-19992233>

Shuttle in LA: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-19935264>

Creativity: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-19959565>

That beeping: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-essex-19921055>

Wi-fi names: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-19760006>

Motherhood in a war zone: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-19657646>

Canned sandwich: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2012/10/15/162941928/sandwich-monday-the-candwich>

Millionaire checks: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-10-02/almost-2-400-millionaires-pocked-unemployment-benefits.html>

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Hand-to-mouth: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/19/us-usa-survey-paycheck-idUSBRE8811BE20120919>

Big onion: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-19620943>

18,000 rpm: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Douglas\\_AC-47\\_Spooky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Douglas_AC-47_Spooky)

Cancer-killing virus: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/9508895/A-virus-that-kills-cancer-the-cure-thats-waiting-in-the-coldc.html>

Garbage need: [http://www.upi.com/Science\\_News/2012/06/07/Sweden-may-have-to-import-garbage/UPI-60061339098420/?spt=mps\\_v=4](http://www.upi.com/Science_News/2012/06/07/Sweden-may-have-to-import-garbage/UPI-60061339098420/?spt=mps_v=4)

Some Christian: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/11/pat-robertson-become-muslim-to-beat-your-wife\\_n\\_1873142.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=mostpopular](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/11/pat-robertson-become-muslim-to-beat-your-wife_n_1873142.html?utm_hp_ref=mostpopular)

Tribal tatoos: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-19628418>

Skydiving: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-19943590>

\$13 trillion pricetag: <http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2012/09/13/846281/financial-crisis-lost-trillions/>

Name for success: <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/16/162936707/movin-on-up-that-may-depend-on-your-last-name>

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Shrinking apartment: <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/18/163174623/to-shrink-rents-sf-considers-shrinking-apartments>

Voting machine: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/florida-to-experiment-with-new-600lever-voting-mac,29699/>

Dog firing: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-19630411>

Astronomy slide show: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-19637073>