

Confronting the Nightmare Ahead

BY FRED ELBEL

What a Way to Go — Life at the End of Empire

(2007 video documentary, 123 minutes, \$14)

Vision Quest Pictures

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What a Way to Go is a documentary about waking up from the American Dream. It is the story of how a middle-class American confronts climate change, peak oil, population overshoot, and mass extinction. As a documentary on the demise of the Culture of Empire, it presents a penetrating view of the human condition and how we relate to the world. The documentary includes interviews with Richard Heinberg, William Catton, Daniel Quinn, Derrick Jensen, Jerry Mander, Chellis Glendinning, Thomas Berry, Richard Manning, and Ran Prieur.

Captivating visual imagery serves as an unrelenting reminder of the unsustainable destination toward which we are speeding. Rich with metaphor, and much more than a documentary, this film is compelling in a manner similar to a work of art.

The film begins with Tim Bennett presenting his rural Michigan childhood and the core Midwestern values he learned from his family. He poetically describes the stories that he grew up with—the myths of abundance, unending progress, technological prowess and the boundlessness of natural resources:

There was a mountain to conquer, and conquer it we would... But the mountain we were climbing was not what we thought it was. Rather than rising from natural forces, the slopes up which we were headed were the results of im-

balance and short-sightedness.... We walked as giants upon the earth, unaware of the footprints we left behind.

He has come to the realization that our cultural stories and myths reinforce our hubris and perpetuate our imbalance with the planet of which we are part:

We're driving a high speed train to the end of life—and we're taking the rest of the planet along with us. And all of this is wrapped tightly inside a culture of denials and lies and absurdities so complex and so powerful that we can barely see through the smog.... The culture of empire works everyday to distract my attention.

Yet our emptiness confirms that our real needs are not being met and we're struggling to fill the void with what our culture offers us. The film continues to explore our predicament via the metaphor of a runaway train.

We've based an economy on the idea that it has to grow every year or else collapse... [yet] soon, the economy will not be able to grow.

—Richard Heinberg

We've had 300 or 400 years of fossil fuel—it's coming to an end. Is that an historical turning point? It's *breath-taking!* ... This is new, this is big, and it is not being talked about.

—Otis Graham

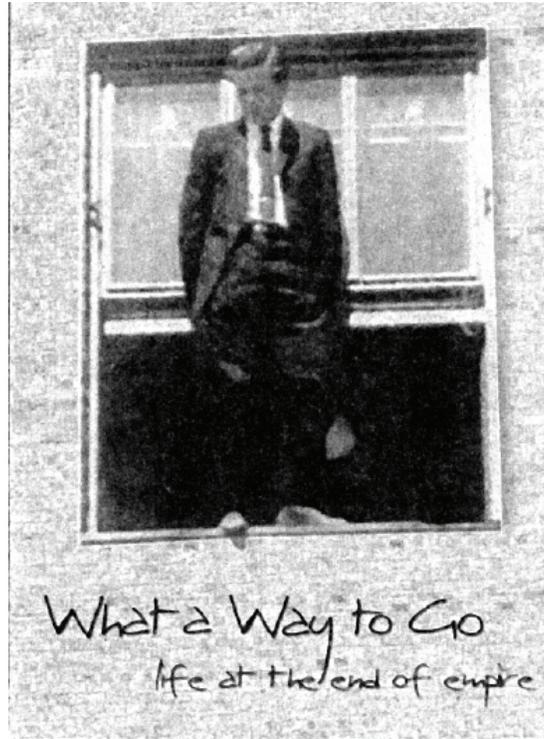
The people of empire are devouring the world. Daniel Quinn observes that “If this goes on, there is going to come a point where the system is going to collapse.” Talking about it clearly and honestly is the first step in casting aside denial and facilitating essential change. So why do we avoid talking about these crucial issues? Trapped in a fantasy

of domination and control, we are in denial of our predicament, as if we wish to hit rock bottom. Yet this denial requires tremendous emotional energy and we don't have much of it left over to change our world.

We're in a culture of two year olds where we won't look at the limits... I think part of looking at things exactly the way they are is feeling how isolated and alienated we have become from ourselves, from the people around us and from the natural world... The natural response is deep grief at the loss of connection.

—Sally Erickson

Focusing on the ancestral roots of our predicament, Daniel Quinn points out how the adaptation of agriculture depended upon disturbance of nature and cultivated the paradigm that we are separate and distinct from nature. This ultimately has led us to marvellous technological innovations which have nevertheless cut us off from our own experience: "We are dissociated from the reality of the planet—we don't act on its behalf." As Thomas Berry notes, "The fatal aspect of science is that science gives us the power, but it doesn't explain how to *use* that power."



The film then follows Bennett on a literal and metaphorical walkabout as he explores ways to set aside our current dogma of empire over the natural world and embrace a sustainable relationship with it. Empire survives at the expense of a democratic republic. Both can not co-exist. We have somehow chosen empire, and empires ultimately collapse.

We are in a "vision quest for the collective mind." Bennett asks "What are we made of? Who will we be in the face of such truths?" We have the opportunity to grow up as a people and a culture, to become integral with the planet earth. But will we?

Unsettling in its direct confrontation of the Culture of Empire, this documentary is highly recommended viewing for anyone who

might have the ability to reshape our future—and that includes all of us. The film leaves the viewer with no quick solutions but rather the challenge to create new options.

It is time to act with great intention. Find your work and do it—it's time. We will find that all of life is on our side. We can do way, way better than empire. ■