

**LETTERS FROM THE FUTURE**  
**a walking performance**  
**texts by Edward Mast**

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## **RELIC #7: FOOD FROM FAR AWAY**

Back in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
we think there stood on this spot what was called  
a “super” market.

A super market was a special place  
where people used invisible currency  
to ask permission to eat food products.  
The super market was called “super”  
because the food products always came  
from hundreds or thousands of miles away.  
They apparently believed that food  
from anywhere closer might be dangerous,  
or might not have the proper taste  
injected. Food from far away was also  
considered safe because it was always  
injected with lethal chemicals  
to kill anything living in the food,  
because anything living in the food  
would poison it, especially if exposed to air.  
Along with these lethal chemicals,  
food from far away was also  
wrapped in what they called “packaging”.  
“Packaging” meant a petroleum cover  
with pictures and numbers and special codes  
to signify that the product inside  
had nothing whatsoever alive in it,  
was filled with lethal substance to make sure,  
had never been exposed to the air  
and came from very far away.  
Only if packaging contained these codes,  
would people ask permission to eat it.  
We still today have examples of this packaging,  
which was made to last forever,  
even after the food inside was gone.

**RELIC #12: UNKNOWNABLE SUBSTANCES**

Back in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,  
physical health was considered to be  
entirely dependent on the Unknown and Unknowable.  
To maintain health and ward off disease,  
individuals were instructed to use  
refined substances with special names  
that no one could possibly understand.  
The longer and more un-understandable  
the better. The least understandable names  
were believed to have the greatest power.  
Some of the substances had many names,  
none of them recognizable.  
It is not clear whether these many names  
represented competing religions  
or whether the many names themselves  
were a pantheon of gods that brought power by their numbers.

If and when an Unknowable Substance  
with an all but unpronounceable name  
failed to heal or maintain health,  
people were forced to turn themselves over  
to a special elite hierarchy  
of Those Who Were Trained In The Operation  
of Unknown and Unknowable Health Machines  
in special temples that made people tremble  
just to step inside.  
It is unclear whether these health machines  
created actual health or not  
but everyone in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century was afraid of them  
and afraid of the temples they lived in.  
Because of this widespread fear,  
the Unknowable Substances with Unknowable Names  
were everywhere preferred to Unknowable Machines  
and their consequences.

**[ceremony of healing with shaker bottle of tablets]**

**RELIC # 9: FASCINATED WITH THEMSELVES**

There are few conclusions we can reach with certainty  
about those people so long ago  
in the faraway 21<sup>st</sup> Century.  
But most studies have consistently concluded  
that whatever else they might have been,  
they were endlessly fascinated with themselves. They believed  
nothing in the universe signified more  
than themselves. Their thoughts, their desires, their fears,  
their faces, their bodies, their genitalia,  
their emotional chemistry, their aspirations,  
their sleep-static dreams, their jokes, their games.  
They could stare at themselves for hours and days.  
They were so fascinated by themselves  
they managed to invent a mild poison  
by letting bacteria rot certain grains  
and produce a clarified liquid so strong  
it was able when swallowed to relax all humility.  
So people who swallowed it became even more  
aggressively and loudly fascinated with themselves.  
If they swallowed enough, they came to believe  
they were beautiful, or strong, or undefeatable,  
even when they had lost the ability to stand up.  
They seemed to forgive each other for  
these bouts of raucous self-fascination.  
Sorry, they would say. It wasn't me.  
It was only the poison speaking for me.  
The accepted response was That's okay,  
I was a little poisoned myself.

**RELIC # 6: SACRED CHEMICALS**  
**C8-H10-N4-O2**

Back in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,  
they seem to have been devoted to a chemical compound  
which they called  
coffee.

This chemical compound C8-H10-N4-O2  
is used today as a strong acid  
for quarrying blocks of granite,  
but back in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
they diluted this compound with boiling water  
and actually swallowed it, several times a day.  
They seem to have believed that only by swallowing  
great quantities of this acidic compound  
could they ever induce the sun to come up.  
No matter how often this did not work  
they apparently continued to believe it.

**RELIC # 14: FAR AWAY IS BETTER**

Back in the 21st Century they preferred everything far away.  
The food they ate came from far away or imitated food from farther away.  
The clothing they wore was fabricated thousands of miles away by people they never saw or thought of.  
The wood and stone and petroleum they used to make their rooms and structures was quarried or clearcut or boiled into shape hundreds or thousands of miles away.  
They mostly did not live where they lived but only slept there. They worked and played in other places, and a favorite fantasy was “getting away” or “getting out”, going someplace far away, the farther away the better.

What they called entertainment was manufactured thousands of miles away and conveyed on a wide variety of electrical devices.  
Musicians or dancers or performers who lived and worked in close proximity were mainly forced to imitate those who manufactured entertainment hundreds or thousands of miles away.  
Much of what they called entertainment was in any case manufactured for the purpose of telling them how and where to spend their invisible currency. For the most part, they obeyed.

They left the important decisions in their lives to others who lived far away, fifty or five hundred miles or more, three thousand miles for the biggest decisions, including decisions of life and death for themselves and other humans on the planet.  
Questioning the sanity of this vast arrangement was known to have certain physical consequences which most tried very hard to avoid.

**RELIC # 3: ETERNITY**

Part of the problem in reconstructing  
this long ago 21<sup>st</sup> Century time  
is the lack of written records.

As near as we can piece together, they created  
a massive volume of words on paper.

But then they began to translate these words  
to electronic ones and zeros on plastic.

These ones and zeros saved so much space  
it became more efficient to store them all  
in fewer and fewer central places.

Finally all the written words in the world  
were stored in one central place  
which was hugely efficient and accessible to everyone  
until there was

an electronic malfunction  
and all those words disappeared.

This was unfortunate in the extreme  
because by that time all the paper  
with all those original written words  
had been used for fuel.

**[ceremony of mourning for Compact Disc.]**

**RELIC # 2: TEMPLE OF INVISIBLE VALUE**

As near as we can reconstruct, back in the 21st Century,  
everyone used invisible currency  
to ask permission for everything they did.  
Some of them worked all day every day  
to get this invisible currency because  
without it no one could do anything.  
Eating, sleeping, having any fun, even excreting or having sex  
seemed to required this invisible currency  
to get permission. Without it,  
you simply were not allowed to exist.  
As far as we can tell, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
was entirely devoted to the unshakeable belief  
in the power of this invisible medium of exchange.  
No religion at any other time has had so many believers  
or such total unchallenged control.  
This invisible means of exchange  
which only existed in people's belief,  
had temples of all sizes built  
to store it, as if it had weight or volume.  
They seemed to believe that if one of these temples  
were to disappear, the invisible currency  
which they believed to live inside  
would disappear with it.  
So these temples and the humans that officiated inside  
were given great power by all those believers.  
Many of the temples were massive buildings  
but many were simple roadside shrines  
where an individual believer could stand  
and commune alone with the invisible currency.  
This was not a god in the clouds  
but a god that passed with immediate impact  
into their hands for a short time at least.  
The interactions at these roadside shrines  
with the magic letters A – T – M  
were intensely private, personal and protected.  
And if successful, one might walk away  
with a handful of paper covered with symbols  
to signify to the rest of the world  
one's increased capacity for getting permission  
for everything necessary in life

**[ceremony of dollar bill]**



**RELIC # 23: ROADSIDE ALTAR**

**[dance of private worship at ATM]**

**RELIC # 22: OWNED**

Back in the distant 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
this spot was called the Center of Town.  
We don't understand what they meant by that  
because this place was not a place  
for the town to use. Instead this place  
was what was called Private Property  
which meant that the ground and the structures on it  
were considered the possessions of individuals.  
Other persons were allowed to enter  
but only for the purpose of giving away  
their invisible medium of exchange for the purpose  
of asking permission to walk away  
with other objects of Private Property  
which then would become the Private Property  
of those who carried them away.  
In this way the individuals who possessed  
this Private Property of ground and structures  
were able to gain a larger amount  
of invisible currency. And all the others  
had less.  
They all thought this was very important.

All of the ground was what they called "owned"  
often by somebody far away.  
And because their shared social goal  
was to accumulate more invisible currency,  
it reached the point where every person  
was required to give away invisible currency  
to get permission to stand on the ground.  
Any ground anywhere, because someone "owned" it  
and wanted more of the invisible currency.  
Standing or even sitting on the ground  
came to require such a large portion  
of invisible currency that some persons  
used up all their invisible currency  
and were no longer able to ask permission  
to stand or sit or exist on the ground.

**[Dance of not touching the ground]**

## RELIC # 4: THE RIGHT TO FEEL GOOD

They were strongly devoted to comfort.  
Of all the surviving words we have,  
which are mainly on packaging and containers,  
the great majority promise one thing:  
use what is in this plastic wrapping  
and you will begin to feel good.

Or:

use what is in this plastic wrapping  
and you will no longer feel so bad.  
This would seem to indicate  
either that they felt bad most of the time  
-- which seems highly possible given the conditions  
they forced on themselves – in which case  
they were always desperate for any relief;  
or else that they lived in constant fear  
of feeling bad: what amounted to  
a widespread social paranoia  
of losing comfort.

They were surrounded by fabricated objects  
intended apparently to create more comfort.  
They would use their invisible currency  
to ask permission to own these objects  
even if they already had more objects  
than they could ever possibly use.  
Their objects were made to last forever  
but not to be usable forever. In fact  
their objects were made to stop being usable  
so people would ask permission for more  
and give away more invisible currency  
which as we have seen was taken to be  
a socio-religious responsibility.  
So everyone asked permission for objects,  
then used them and then they put them aside  
to make room for more objects. The set-aside objects  
were smashed into massive piles and buried  
or simply left unsmashed in piles  
which grew and dominated large sections of ground.  
All of these objects did not make them happy.  
In fact they were a source of considerable stress:  
acquiring the invisible currency to own them,

finding new places to keep them in storage,  
finding new places to set them aside.

Furthermore most of the objects were fabricated  
by people so far away that they  
were never seen by the people who lived here.  
And those far away people were not allowed  
to own the objects they made, and so  
the people who lived here were always afraid  
that far away people would rise up in violence  
to take away all their treasured objects.  
In fact the people who owned all the objects  
constantly complained about all those objects.  
But still they lived in perpetual fear  
that the stream of objects might stop.

**RELIC #1: THE BASIS OF ALL THINGS**

They lived on petroleum.  
They wore it. They ate it.  
They used it to build their tools and shelters.  
And toys. And ink. And art. And medicine.  
They famously used it to fuel their cars  
and gave up a massive percentage of the ground  
to make space for cars to go or just sit.  
The cars transformed the petroleum into  
something people could breathe. So they breathed it.  
Their toys and tools made of petroleum  
also created invisible gasses  
that they would breathe.  
They didn't like the smell or taste  
but they believed that breathing petroleum  
would save them time and energy and effort  
and make their world more easy to live in.  
They used it as if it would last forever.  
They knew it would not, though they used it anyway.  
Some of the products are still with us,  
so in a way you could say after all  
that it lasted beyond their lives.

**RELIC # 21: EXILED FROM EACH OTHER**

They apparently thought it best  
for children to live alone in a building  
with one male and one female  
isolated for much of the time  
from other children and mothers and fathers.  
The children were forced to find all their needs  
in these isolated adults, most often  
one female and one male.  
These parents were forced over and over  
to make up from zero the entire process  
and deal with all the demands and frustrations  
mostly on their own. We have some evidence  
that some of these what they called “households”  
were reasonably happy and pleasant places.  
But we also have considerable evidence that  
the great majority of children escaped  
from this precarious arrangement the minute they were able.  
And instead of being grateful to the one male and one female,  
those children consistently blamed those adults  
for the outcomes of this unwieldy social pattern.  
And in spite of that, those children would then  
go off themselves and repeat the arrangement  
with children of their own, and then be surprised  
when their children escaped at the first possible chance  
and then blamed the two new adults in their turn.

An unfortunate collateral effect of all this  
was families scattering even farther  
and it reached a point when all these relations  
could not even see one another without  
a massive expenditure of petroleum fuel  
as well as time and invisible currency.  
Under that pressure and trouble and expense  
we can only imagine the consequences  
when they finally met. But nevertheless  
they seemed to think there was no other way  
for children to be loved and cared for, and so  
they insisted on believing this way of life was ideal  
and blamed any failings on each other and themselves.

**RELIC # 8: SAFETY**

They lived in constant fear of each other.  
They feared whatever they didn't know  
or whatever didn't look like themselves.  
or whatever didn't sound like themselves.  
People who looked or sounded different  
were often corralled in security buildings  
with large walls, or camps with fences.  
Even within their homogenous zones  
where people looked and sounded alike  
they forced each other to say out loud  
a set of words we translate as  
a Loyalty Oath or Oath of Allegiance.  
At first it was only for new people  
or people who looked or sounded different  
but then they made everyone say it  
starting with children in school every day.  
And soon it became a common greeting  
you would say to anyone you met on the street.  
You would put your hand on your heart to recite  
this Oath of Allegiance to say hello.  
Apparently it didn't work even then.  
The people of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century spent  
more of their hard-won invisible currency  
on walls and weapons and guards and implants  
and surveillance and military preparations  
than they spent on anything else in their world.

**[ceremony of greeting: "I pledge allegiance"]**

## HOW DID IT END?

We don't know how this 21<sup>st</sup> Century civilization came to an end. All we have are theories and suggestions.

We know they covered some 40 percent of the ground with a mixture of pulverized limestone and sand along with petroleum and tar.

We know that they lost knowledge at an alarming rate and by the 21<sup>st</sup> Century very few people knew how to grow food or build machines because others far away did it for them.

Most of the artifacts we have remaining were products of their fear. We have to assume they also had various joys and happiness but those were apparently expressed in ways that did not depend on invisible currency or objects or any of those forms of worship to which they devoted so much of their lives.

When we come to examine what happened to them, we may theorize that they never learned better and brought on catastrophe and all their works were lost.

Or perhaps they learned but catastrophe came anyway. Maybe there was nothing they could do. Maybe their massive industry of safety continued to dominate all their lives with higher and more electrified walls to expel and keep out those with more needs. Maybe those with more needs became strong and overcame the walls. Or maybe the people inside those electrified walls won all their battles and protected their privileges and maintained their privilege to be the last to starve.

At the same time, however, we cannot neglect the opposite possibility, which is: maybe we have so few objects now



because they did learn in time after all  
and gave up the power they had over others  
and learned to live smaller lives  
closer together with fewer objects  
and those objects not made to last forever,  
and so left little mark on their future,  
not because of their failure but because  
of a kind of success that was quite new to them.  
They were biologically very like us.  
They were touched every moment by light  
from the same set of stars as we are, though back then  
in slightly different visible positions.  
It is not impossible that their story ended  
by learning to live their own lives  
and to pass away in their own time.  
Maybe the fact that we have so little  
shows how much they learned after all.

These are of course only matters of conjecture  
and strictly speaking outside the scope  
of our research. Nevertheless  
these different theories impact our work.  
The people back in the 21st Century  
disliked learning lessons from the past,  
but we don't,  
and we can invite them to be our teachers.  
For all their unexplainable habits,  
we still have plenty in common, and maybe  
their long sleep can be our waking up.

*end*