

**Preview**

A reader unable to discern a theme in this month’s Tower Talk is forgiven. This is an unusually eclectic issue. Articles range from a rant lamenting deterioration of the human condition, to a pean to national anthems, a modest comment on economic conditions, Contributing Editor Anne Turner’s report on the never-ending Van Ness Project, and a query regarding the overall sanity of SFT residents. Austin and Van Ness are on their first post-Covid cruise in yet another effort to better their fractious relationship.



*Tower Talk Being Assembled*

**Essay: The Human Condition**

James W. Guthrie

The pandemic created an unusually difficult time for almost everyone. We have suffered as individuals, as a community, as a people. However, recovery, at least in most of the developed world, now appears probable, even if at a pace slower and more uneven than one would hope. We now have sufficient breathing room (no pun intended) to assess what has happened and speculate regarding what might happen next.

So, “How are we doing?” I am not asking this question about anyone individually, all of us as a community, or even we as a nation. Rather, I am asking what is the human condition? What are

we as a species experiencing? Is humankind safe and flourishing, treading water, or imperiled?

A reader might reasonably ask how can one undertake an assessment of such a global and abstract nature? And, even if metrics existed by which fully to gauge the human condition, would the extraordinary variation from continent to continent, nation to nation, and even tribe to tribe eviscerate any chance of arriving at a generalized finding?

Possibly so. Readers may dismiss the whole idea or disagree with any part of it. Rejoinders will be welcomed.

Humans as a species are not doing well. On the dimensions explored below, only science appears at all hopeful. All others have a downward cast. Conditions on all but one selected dimensions, if not addressed and corrected soon, have the capacity for eliminating humans from this planet. Regrettably, little on the horizon suggests a change in the unhappy trajectory. The only hopeful news is that mankind, should it ever muster the will, has the capacity to save itself.

Environment: One can debate the causes or consequences of climate change. Maybe humans are not responsible completely, and maybe it is not as serious as some doomsayers assert. However, what is not up for debate is whether or not it is happening. Certainly climate shifts have existed in the past. The difference now is the pace at which climate is changing and the likelihood that humans are contributing significantly to the acceleration.

If it were simply a matter of the climate changing, there might not be too much to be concerned about. However, what follows from climate change has frightening consequences; e.g., meteorological extremes, floods, fires, drought, tornados, hurricanes, elevated ocean levels, reduced polar ice, and the collateral threat posed to endangered species. Whatever its intensity, there’s hardly any way to argue that climate change of this magnitude and pace is a good thing for the human species.

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Moreover, whereas modernized nations, the U.S. included, are aiming at lower long term heat absorbing carbon emissions, huge challenges remain in Asia and Africa where inhabitants depend crucially upon fossil fuels.

**Wealth:** Never in human history have so few controlled so much treasure and so many others suffered as a consequence. An estimated 7 billion humans inhabit Planet Earth. That is a stunning figure and worrisome by itself. Possibly we are already over-extending earth's resources. What also is disturbing is the distribution of resources. Credit Suisse reports that the top one percent of households globally own 43 percent of all personal wealth, while the bottom 50 percent own only one percent of total wealth. That top-tier one percent amounts to 52 million people who are all millionaires in net wealth (after debt). Within this elite fraction are 175,000 ultra-wealthy people (those with over \$50 million in net wealth), or 0.1 percent, who in turn own 25 percent of the world's wealth.

Certainly throughout history a few controlled more resources than the many. However, it is unlikely that the magnitude of inequality has ever been anything like the present. This disequilibrium has consequences, almost no one of which is good. Not only are some humans deprived of fundamental needs, the scandalous flaunting of opulence on the part of mindless celebrities triggers resentment and alienation and contributes to social instability and violence.

**Health:** More is known regarding health than ever before, yet huge segments of the world's population suffer ill health. In poor societies, food and medical care are insufficient. In wealthy societies, supplies of food may be sufficient, but it is unhealthy food. Processed foods are triggering obesity, diabetes, and other diseases. Diet may also be triggering a reduction in and malformation of male sperm. Fertility rates in wealthy nations are plummeting.

**Fulfillment:** An ever more depersonalized universal culture is emerging. Electronic communications, so-called "social media," are driving people apart. Nuance, subtlety, intimacy,

tolerance, understanding, inspiration, sympathy, compassion, and genuine humor are now devalued and replaced by slogans, stereotypes, symbols, artifice, and superficiality. "Easy" and "fast" are replacing "accurate" and "complete."

Electronic communication forces one to be extreme in order to be noticed. Little about such communication caters to the norm or pulls people together. Facebook is advertised as a means for joining us when, in fact, it is only a platform for advertising. Organized religion has lost much of its ability to create community and often now serves as a wedge to divide.

**Science:** This is a double-sided coin. One need only follow the exploits of those exploring Mars to see how extraordinary science and technology can be. The rapid development and distribution of Covid-19 vaccines is another stunning example of science's promise. We are led to believe that even more wizardry exists on the horizon in the interstices where biology meets chemistry and physics. Alternatively, artificial intelligence portends of both hope and harm. Warfare is becoming ever more deadly and depersonalized. Only in the modern era has the capacity existed to obliterate the entirety of mankind from the face of the Earth.

**Leadership:** Historically, humans have benefited from the presence of acclaimed leaders, such as Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Margaret Thatcher, and Mother Teresa. These individuals and those like them promoted a moral high ground, but also could inspire those around them to reach for a greater good.

While finance and technology have notable contemporary leaders, e.g., Bezos, Musk, Gates, Buffett, and several Chinese entrepreneurs, it is difficult to proclaim them as worldly leaders in any sense other than commerce. They are influential; they shape day-to-day living and the environment, but do little to shape the soul, enhance human spirit, or proclaim a path to a better world. No religious leader currently exists, certainly no longer the Pope, who can bind humanity together.



## Economic Complexities

James W. Guthrie

U.S. economic recovery is underway. Still, major impediments stifle greater economic growth. One is a shortage of critical materials needed for manufacturing and construction. For example, the current shortage of new automobiles occurred because manufacturers cannot get the electronic chips they need. Within a year, market dynamics will sort out most of these supply problems.

Another growth impediment is a shortage of labor in service areas, such as restaurants, hotels, and commercial retail. Despite job openings, unemployment remains higher than the pre-Covid period. This condition is puzzling because many advertised jobs are going unfilled.

Sometimes, the answer is easy. Truck drivers, for example, are in short supply. Moving companies and freight haulers cannot fulfill customer orders because they cannot find sufficient numbers of drivers. This inconveniences consumers, but it also contributes to inflation because companies operating trucks are increasing their billing prices, simply because they can.

This is likely a short-term problem. Truck driving schools shut down during pandemic. They are now reopening and enrolling large numbers of prospective drivers. When they return to full operation, the driver supply likely will return to a better balance

Something else may explain labor shortages. Currently, in some states, federal Covid cash supplements, unemployment benefits, and state and local welfare payments are more lucrative than working.

Here are a few examples of states in which total unemployment and welfare payments come close to matching or exceed average individual annual wages: Hawaii: \$60,590, New York: \$43,700, New Jersey: \$43,450, and California: \$40,245. For those in low paying jobs, a return to work means a cut in pay.

## Regrettable Truth: Extra-Terrestrials Reside at The Towers

James W. Guthrie

I previously thought Trump supporters were a bit over the top regarding ballot box irregularities. In light of what I describe below, I am more sympathetic to any charges of voter fraud.

I am not being cute here. What follows is an accurate, dispassionate, and verifiable description of a real life, true event. Readers perhaps can connect the dots.

Among my civic duties, I serve as a member of the Program Committee. I and committee colleagues were interested in gaining information regarding resident preferences. "What kinds of programs do people want to watch or participate in, and at what time of day would they prefer they be offered?"

To determine answers to these questions we designed a simple one-page survey. Copies were distributed to all resident cubbies. The survey directed respondents to place completed surveys in a security desk ballot box. On Friday afternoon May 14, an appropriately labeled ballot box was placed at the lobby security desk.

Before placing the box on the main lobby Security Desk counter, I peered into it; I even put my hand all the way to the bottom to ensure that it was empty. Then I put the top back on the ballot box in anticipation that residents would place completed program survey forms in it at their convenience.

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On Saturday morning, May 15, I harvested responses. The box is small, and I did not want a resident to be discouraged because he or she could not cram a completed survey into an overly full box.

Using my key, I opened up the box and found five completed program surveys. But that is not all I found. The box also contained surveys for other purposes, surveys that had been distributed over many prior weeks. There was a Shelter-in-Place survey from the Safety Committee and a Next Steps Advisory Committee survey.

The most curious item in the ballot box was not a survey of any kind; it was an envelope marked "Ballot". This is precisely the kind of envelope the nominating committee uses when distributing materials for Resident Council elections. It is even identically stamped "Ballot."

I conferred with one of my Program Committee colleagues and recently elected Resident Council member, Michele McLaughlin, (note: her first name has just one "l") and she inquired "Was the long overdue ballot cast by one of my supporters?"

That moved me to open the ballot envelope. Of the candidates listed, Michele was not one of them. That was perplexing. I chaired the nominating committee that put her on the ballot as a 2021 candidate. Why was her name not on this ballot?

Upon a closer reading, I determined that the ballot was not from the most recent Council election; it was from the one preceding it, the 2019/2020 Council election.

There is no way that this ballot could have been in the box when I secured it on Friday from Annie Tang. I had visually inspected the box interior and had thoroughly run my hands all the way to the bottom. When initially placed at the security desk, it was an empty box. The above listed items had to have been placed in this box sometime between Friday afternoon and Saturday morning.

I can cut people some slack for putting other surveys, even vastly out of date surveys, in the box. But what in the world motivated someone to put an outdated Council election ballot in the

box? Stranger yet, we harvested a package of flower seeds from the ballot box.

Who are my fellow residents? Can someone be out of touch by as much as 15 months? Who would place flower seeds in a ballot box? Are forces at work that are not easily explained? Just sayin'.

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## **National Anthems**

Eric Kamal Hilgendorf

I miss a lot of things these days thanks to the wide roaming nature of Covid, and I am not alone. If I were to create a list, it would span everything from festivals and food trucks to sports and social life. But one of the most emblematic and notable personal losses for me stems from the fact that I live across from a school, in Abu Dhabi. When school was in session (and I don't mean online), every morning young voices raised in song, wafted across the street, as they proudly sang the National Anthem of the UAE.

I was born and grew up in Beirut before and during the Lebanese Civil War and I gleefully attended an all-Arabic elementary school off Corniche Al Mazraa. I loved everything about it and even though I was the sole American in a sea of Arab youth, one of my favorite memories was standing with the entire student body and belting out the national anthem every morning for assembly.

It was like the scene from the Tom Hanks animated movie, *The Polar Express*, in which all the elves at the North Pole are singing "Santa Claus is Coming to Town." Except for the fact that the elves were all clad in red and we were dressed in green uniforms, that was us, all 800 students, singing at the top of our lungs. And as children are occasionally less inhibited, we sang loud and strong, regardless of whether or not we were a mile and a half off key because above all, what mattered was participation.

There is something crucial in national anthems, isn't there? Below the words and underneath the melody, there is something like a subconscious river that carries us as individuals into a

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collective calm lake. For me, it doesn't matter if the color of your passport or the imprimatur is different from mine, or if my anthem isn't being sung. The event is all-embracing and for that single moment when we rise in respect, we are united. Call me an emotional simpleton, but there is tremendous power when we stand shoulder-to-shoulder (apologies Mr. and Mrs. Covid, now it's "when we stand appropriately socially distanced, at least six feet apart") face the flag and participate in honoring that image of unity for a common ideal or a shared vision. In those moments, with our pasts behind us and the future on our doorstep, it begets the notion that nothing is out of reach and whatever we set our minds upon, we can achieve.

If this current Covid contagion has taught us anything, it is that we are far more vulnerable and fragile while simultaneously far more tightly coupled and connected than we ever previously imagined. If we can keep that reality, that sense of oneness, as our central focus, there is pervasive power that will eclipse not only this situation, but any other challenges that will come our way.

I pine for the day when Covid is not garnering the bulk of global headlines and calling all the social policy shots so that we can reassemble and once again stand united to honor our individual and collective positions on this journey. Perhaps in the meantime, hearing the national anthem at schools (albeit empty schools), might add to that daily dose of gratitude for all that the leadership government is doing to get us through these times, and the togetherness for which we all long.

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### Red on Van Ness

Anne M. Turner

The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) is running a \$303 million project which it says will be our first Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system. It plans to operate buses up and down Van Ness at greater speeds due to dedicated lanes and synchronized stop lights. The project requires tearing up and repaving Van Ness, new landscaping, and concrete bubbles for

bus stops. Sensibly, since the street is torn up anyway, old sewers and water system pipes are also being replaced.

I have been following this project for the last three or four years from my 9th floor apartment on the Van Ness side of SFT. It seems to me that construction workers never finish anything: they dig and dig, excavate a lot of rock, and then disappear for months at a time. Lately, however, SFMTA claims to see light at the end of the tunnel. They are now projecting a completion date of Winter, 2022, and they say the workers are engaged in finishing tasks: creating surface bus lanes, planting trees, activating the new streetlamps, etc.



"I'd let you talk more, but you're not as interesting as me."

Here is what I have observed over the last few months. First, workers spend a lot of time creating two parallel lanes running the length of each block. They are divided by a four-foot-wide trench, which currently contains construction debris. The dirt is pounded down, and side barriers are created using wood forms. Eventually, cement trucks turn up to fill the new spaces, and I was sure that once the concrete dried, asphalt would follow. Watching professionals lay concrete is wonderful fun: they use long sweeper poles to flatten it, and specialists crawl from the sides, smoothing out the surface. The hole is covered with plastic sheets and after a couple of days of drying metal grids are laid across the concrete (maybe 10 feet apart?).

Now comes the mystery part. Two types of trucks appear: one pumps its sand and gravel contents up to a tank on the other, which swishes the mixture around turning it red, and then pumps it through a mobile tube down to workers in the concrete lane. The workers create a layer that doesn't look very deep, but it does cover the metal grids. It is smoothed, and then other workers throw some sort of red liquid on top. This is also

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smoothed, and periodically somebody sprays the whole thing with water — I suppose to keep the layer malleable enough to be flattened. The workers leave us with two red lanes with a trench down the middle. I wonder if these are wide enough for the buses that are going to run up and down Van Ness.

Of course, I have plenty of other questions. To begin with, what is going to keep the new lanes from cracking under the weight of the multi-ton buses? Who chose red as a (presumably) safety color? Ugly is as ugly does. What is going into the trench? Landscaping? Wiring for the traffic lights?

It used to be that if I wanted to know about some public construction project, I would hang around the site until I spotted a man who looked to be in charge or at least knowledgeable. At my age, I have found it is okay to approach male strangers, and I have been lucky. There was the foreman on the harbor project who explained where the sediment scraped from the bottom was going. Or the visiting engineer, in town because his wife was here for a conference, who knew all about why the new boat slips were floating and had tall, pointed structures at the water end (it had to do with birds).

But it has been more than a year since this strategy worked on the Van Ness “Improvement” Project. Back at the beginning I asked a worker about the brick pipes his colleagues were digging up and learned all about putting metal conduit inside the pipes instead of digging a new cross-street trench. Good thinking, yes? These days, however, there does not seem to be anybody to ask about the red lanes going in on Van Ness.

Careful reading of SFMTA’s website and an email to the staff answered several questions. There will be nine stops along Van Ness, each featuring a concrete turnout and a bench just like the existing transit stops. We have lost our stop at the Pine Street corner, so the closest stops will be at Sutter and Sacramento. Transit rides will continue to be \$2.50 each way with a Clipper card or \$3.00 for cash.

SFMTA has purchased 60 new trolley buses,

many of which will be assigned to the Van Ness line. Sixty-foot long, the electric trolley buses are rubber tired with motors powered by electricity from overhead wires. The name “trolley” refers to the poles on the roof of the bus that transfer electricity from overhead wires to the bus. As the SFMTA website points out, “Although their operations can be less flexible than that of motor buses, trolley buses are more energy efficient, much quieter and much less polluting. They operate better on hills, require less maintenance and are longer lasting than motor buses.” The trolley buses also have back up batteries so that they can travel “off wire” if they run into a blockage on their route.

Again, quoting the website, “San Francisco Muni has the largest trolley bus fleet of any transit agency in the United States and Canada. Muni’s trolley coaches (as well as its streetcars and cable cars) are almost entirely pollution-free since their electric power comes from the city’s hydroelectric Hetch Hetchy Water and Power System.”

I am not entirely sure why this is true, but I will acknowledge that learning about the trolley buses has increased my enthusiasm for the Van Ness project. I still do not like the red lanes — why couldn’t they be green? But I have the strong feeling that the project will be completed in my lifetime, among other reasons because SFMTA needs the workers for its Geary Improvement Project.

*Tower Talk* is published solely by San Francisco Towers’ resident, James W Guthrie. It is distributed electronically. Printed copies are provided upon request. Its purpose is to enhance a sense of community via provision of accurate information, airing of responsible opinion, and now and then an effort at humor. It is not aligned with any partisan organization and, if at all predisposed, it favors “The Underdog.” It neither seeks nor bears managerial endorsement and does not rely for production or distribution upon San Francisco Towers’ resources. The publisher is individually responsible for content, welcomes dissenting views, and eagerly accepts submissions of original literary works and opinion. Production depends crucially upon Jennifer Hamilton and Peter Hertzmann. Anne M. Turner is a Contributing Editor. Print archives are maintained by John Darby. All past issues, beginning with Volume I, No.1 are available free of charge by visiting [jameswguthrie.com](http://jameswguthrie.com).