

Looking Backward, Again

Daniel Mathews (with apologies to Edward Bellamy)

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Once they grew up, they started walking.

They walked for a long time, for eons. They walked over lands and continents, they walked through plenty and drought, through hope and desperation, through life and death. They walked for survival. They walked along the road of life, a road unembellished, inglorious and unimproved. Across mountain and plain, through forest and swamp, they ran from fires, they sheltered from storms, they comforted each other at night, and they fell at all the hurdles before them: the floods, the famines, the earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, avalanches - catastrophe enveloped them all. In time there were many tribes of walkers, all walking towards the Promised Land. The Promised Land was survival, it was mastery, and hunger propelled them there. They could not stop: when they stopped, hunger overtook them, other tribes overtook them; they knew they had to keep going.

They raised their kings and nobles aloft: these were the first privileged travellers. The kings and nobles did not have to endure the effort of walking. The walkers carried them on their shoulders, and placed them in sedan chairs. Some of the walkers did not like the extra work, but other walkers believed they needed the king, and the kings and nobles were not slow to agree. The kings and nobles needed the exemption from walking to better lead and defend the walkers, they said, and the walkers served them, first from necessity, then from habit. Strange as it may seem, the king and nobles passed along their seats to their descendants, even if they did nothing to earn the position. The walkers began to regard those above in awe; they reflected in reverent tones upon such a beautiful life, unscarred by everyday sores, and such a gifted person, being so carried above the rest.

The rulers, for their part, could indeed see further from above. Theirs was a position removed from the drudgery of everyday labour. Sometimes they were concerned for the workers carrying them, and when the walkers began to lose their way, or headed towards a cliff or ravine, they called them back to the path. Sometimes when the walkers were having difficulty traversing through the sand or up a steep hillside, they took pity and called out to them to take heart. But sometimes their luxury got the better of them, and they indulged themselves in avarice, they believed that they really were divine, and neglected the walkers,

or cudgelled them in contempt. When they failed in their duty to lead and to defend, it was the walkers who suffered the difficulties; it was the walkers who fell, who struggled up hillsides, across mires and over craggy mountains. No matter who succumbed, there was always someone else to carry the king. The king and the nobles were defended by those they supposedly defended. And when people fell, and the king and the nobles saw their suffering, they became only more determined to maintain their position. For there were only so many seats available; it was the way things were. Some amongst the nobles came to believe that they deserved their seats. Strange as it may seem, some amongst them even came to believe that it was their right.

But from some clever mind came an idea, and it made life a little easier.

And so the walkers built for themselves a chariot, and they pulled it along. They were no longer walkers: they became charioteers. Things were a little less burdensome, and sometimes the people could ride in the chariot and rest. They began to drive along a new road: the road of civilization. This road was populated by arrogance, by advantage, by empires and martial glory. The charioteers went forth and multiplied, and the chariot became larger and larger. There were more charioteers, and more amongst them were royal or noble. Those tribes of walkers which remained were overtaken and swallowed up, as necessary labour to pull the chariots. Plushest seats were constructed at the front of the chariot, for the nobles, and the king remained in his sedan chair. But the road was bumpy, and endured jolts and shocks and the chariot swayed and groaned horribly. When there was a steep hill, those pulling the chariot suffered terribly. They pulled for hours without respite, and suffered exhaustion, and many died and were left at the side of the road. When the road was at its worst, the ordeal for the pullers was worse than it had ever been walking; but on average, things were a little easier. Strange as it may seem, the king and the nobles did not always notice, but when they did, it pained them too.

Still they strove towards the Promised Land. The Promised Land was survival, it was stability, it was conquest. And still they could not stop: when they stopped, hunger overtook them, other chariots overtook them, they were absorbed and defeated. They knew they had to keep going; they knew they could not slow down. Sometimes the whole chariot overturned; but those above, while jolted, could more often hang on and outlast the upheaval, protected and shielded by those they were meant to protect and shield. When this happened, the king and nobles became even more determined to protect and maintain their position. Still, despite the improvements, there were only so many plush seats available; it was simply the way things were. They still believed that they deserved their seats. They became ever more detached from the lower-order charioteers, those who pulled and maintained the chariot. Some still believed that it was their right.

But from some clever mind came an idea, and it made life a little easier.

And so the charioteers built for themselves a carriage, and they pulled it, but they rode in it sometimes also. They were no longer charioteers: they became coachwomen and coachmen. Things were a little less burdensome, the driving was a little easier, and inside was better shelter from the elements. They

began to drive along a new road: the road of knowledge. This road was still populated by arrogance, by advantage, by empires and martial glory. But it was also populated by trade and by commerce. And - though very sparsely - it was populated by understanding and by thought. The coachwomen and coachmen went forth and multiplied, and the carriage became larger and larger. There were more coach riders, more coach pullers, and more amongst them were aristocracy. Those tribes of charioteers which remained were overtaken and swallowed up; more people were needed to pull the heavier carriages, and the subspecies were very useful. The carriages moved faster now, on better wheels. The tribes coalesced, and the carriages grew; some were becoming enormous. Plush, decorated, pampered seats were constructed on the top of the carriage, and the aristocracy took up their position in these few seats that were available. The king, noticing the carriage now afforded better conditions than the sedan chair, took up a seat there also, and he became little better than any other noble.

But still there were obstacles, and the road was never completely smooth. Still those in the undercarriage they had to work tirelessly to keep up the speed, and still they strove towards the Promised Land. The Promised Land was knowledge, it was understanding, but it was still usually survival, stability, and maintenance of conquests. The carriage had to keep going: for they had made so much progress, they could not imagine stopping it and reverting to their previous, dismal lives. If they were to stop - horror of horrors! - they would lose their way of life, they would be overtaken by other carriages, they would be savage and backward and shortly defeated and enslaved, just like those they had enslaved themselves.

And so there trundled

a prodigious coach which the masses of humanity were harnessed to and dragged toilsomely along a very hilly and sandy road. The driver was hungry, and permitted no lagging, though the pace was necessarily very slow. Despite the difficulty of drawing the coach at all along so hard a road, the top was covered with passengers who never got down, even at the steepest ascents. These seats on top were very breezy and comfortable. Well up out of the dust, their occupants could enjoy the scenery at their leisure, or critically discuss the merits of the straining team. Naturally such places were in great demand and the competition for them was keen, every one seeking as the first end in life to secure a seat on the coach for himself and to leave it to his child after him. By the rule of the coach a man could leave his seat to whom he wished, but on the other hand there were many accidents by which it might at any time be wholly lost. For all that they were so easy, the seats were very insecure, and at every sudden jolt of the coach persons were slipping out of them and falling to the ground, where they were instantly compelled to take hold of the rope and help to drag the coach on which they had before ridden so pleasantly. It was naturally regarded

as a terrible misfortune to lose one's seat, and the apprehension that this might happen to them or their friends was a constant cloud upon the happiness of those who rode.

But did they think only of themselves? you ask. Was not their very luxury rendered intolerable to them by comparison with the lot of their brothers and sisters in the harness, and the knowledge that their own weight added to their toil? Had they no compassion for fellow beings from whom fortune only distinguished them? Oh, yes; commiseration was frequently expressed by those who rode for those who had to pull the coach, especially when the vehicle came to a bad place in the road, as it was constantly doing, or to a particularly steep hill. At such times, the desperate straining of the team, their agonized leaping and plunging under the pitiless lashing of hunger, the many who fainted at the rope and were trampled in the mire, made a very distressing spectacle, which often called forth highly creditable displays of feeling on the top of the coach. At such times the passengers would call down encouragingly to the toilers of the rope, exhorting them to patience, and holding out hopes of possible compensation in another world for the hardness of their lot, while others contributed to buy salves and liniments for the crippled and injured. It was agreed that it was a great pity that the coach should be so hard to pull, and there was a sense of general relief when the specially bad piece of road was gotten over. This relief was not, indeed, wholly on account of the team, for there was always some danger at these bad places of a general overturn in which all would lose their seats.

It must in truth be admitted that the main effect of the spectacle of the misery of the toilers at the rope was to enhance the passengers' sense of the value of their seats upon the coach, and to cause them to hold on to them more desperately than before. If the passengers could only have felt assured that neither they nor their friends would ever fall from the top, it is probable that, beyond contributing to the funds for liniments and bandages, they would have troubled themselves extremely little about those who dragged the coach.

I am well aware that this will appear to the men and women of the [twenty-first] century an incredible inhumanity, but there are two facts, both very curious, which partly explain it. In the first place, it was firmly and sincerely believed that there was no other way in which Society could get along, except the many pulled at the rope and the few rode, and not only this, but that no very radical improvement even was possible, either in the harness, the coach, the roadway, or the distribution of the toil. It had always been as it was, and it always would be so. It was a pity, but it could not be helped, and philosophy forbade wasting compassion on what was beyond remedy.

The other fact is yet more curious, consisting in a singular hallu-

ination which those on the top of the coach generally shared, that they were not exactly like their brothers and sisters who pulled at the rope, but of finer clay, in some way belonging to a higher order of beings who might justly expect to be drawn. The strangest thing about the hallucination was that those who had but just climbed up from the ground, before they had outgrown the marks of the rope upon their hands, began to fall under its influence. As for those whose parents and grand-parents before them had been so fortunate as to keep their seats on the top, the conviction they cherished of the essential difference between their sort of humanity and the common article was absolute. The effect of such a delusion in moderating fellow feeling for the sufferings of the mass of [women and] men into a distant and philosophical compassion is obvious.

But from some clever mind came an idea, and it made life a little easier. And then another idea, and then another, and then another. Soon they were making all manner of improvements to the carriage. They were learning, and learning fast. And the carriage became faster, became more efficient, became easier to run. But always those living at the top of the carriage managed to secure, with each improvement, a greater share of improvement in their own condition, at the top. For they were revered, and they could afford greater improvements for themselves. Some of them, filled for the moment with compassion for the mass of women and men, dispersed some of their funds for the improvement of the undercarriage. But still the undercarriage was a dirty and unsanitary place to live; the conditions were filthy; and the work in pulling the carriage, while improved, was still difficult, dangerous, and back-breaking. The improvements were many and varied: now they were improving the doors, now the windows; now they extended the size of the carriage; now they improved the wheels and the axles. Now they started using metal in the carriage, and it was much stronger and able to weather bad conditions. Now they came upon the idea of tracks, and soon enough, they were laying rails down and pulling the carriage along tracks, which was a much easier task. Then they came upon the idea of the steam engine. But still they had to keep up the carriage; still they had to grease the wheels, and many of the workers were crushed by the moving carriage, or injured by the machines. The engine often broke down or the carriage derailed, and then all were called upon to pull it, as before, except now it was much larger, and heavier. Often they were dying. More people were required for the maintenance and the upkeep, for collecting up the metal and designing new machines. The slower moving carriages were quickly subdued and absorbed into the more efficient ones.

More carriages were added; an engine carriage was added; and metallic wheels glided along gleaming tracks under the enormous power of the engine. The carriage became an enormous locomotive, travelling at tremendous speed. They were no longer coachwomen and coachmen: they became railwaywomen and railwaymen.

Things were much less burdensome, although with so many passengers in

the underclass, their conditions were abysmal. Although the work was hard and dangerous, it did not compare to pulling a chariot or a carriage. They began to drive along a new road: the road of industry. It was a road populated by knowledge, by engineering, by technical proficiency and managerial skill; it was a complex and intricate road, but it was still a road of advantage and exploitation.

Those who formerly travelled on the top of the carriage, now moved into the first class compartment. From their compartment they could not usually see or hear the lower-class compartments. The lower-class travellers were often rowdy, however, and the first-class passengers of course retained their terror of losing their place. Now even further cut off and living an almost entirely separate existence from the rest, their belief that they were exceptional further solidified; they reinforced the belief amongst themselves.

The road, however, still was not safe. The locomotive ploughed through hills, through massive tunnels bored out with explosives, it roared through mountain passes and over intricate bridges. Ever accelerating, it sometimes became unstable. And there were still steep ascents, still broken tracks, still poorly made tracks and roads. When the train suffered jerks and jolts, the first-class passengers in their comfortable cabins were more often able to hang on through the commotion. It was not the same for the lower-class passengers. When shakes and shudders came, they were thrown against the sharp rusted metallic sides of their carriages, all as one great huddled mass, squashed and squeezed together in the rear of the train.

And at such great speed, when a serious obstacle came in the way, the train derailed and overturned, flipped and rolled and crashed with such violence that few survived. Several trains crashed this way, whole locomotive-loads rolled to their deaths in ravines, whole carriages broke off and exploded against the hillside.

But still they strove towards the Promised Land. Now, perhaps, the Promised Land began to incorporate something new: justice. Just a glimpse, just a thought, just a possibility of a way of living that made a little sense. The Promised Land was now also technique, it was technology, it was knowledge, it was understanding, but it was still also stability, the maintenance of precious achievements, and ultimately survival. To stop, or slow down - horror of horrors! - became unimaginable. Not only would this dash the potential for progress towards justice, not only would they lose their way of life, not only would they be overtaken by other carriages, not only would they be savage and backward and shortly defeated and enslaved: in addition to all this, to slow down would put the lower-class passengers out of a job. They would have had to get out and walk, just like the ancient primitives. They, who should have known best the potential for disaster, depended on it the most for survival. And the first-class passengers, who benefited the most from the arrangement, obviously had no interest in slowing down: instead, they blamed those who wished to slow down as responsible for the disasters, for hindering the free motion of the train. Besides, there were only so many seats available; it was the way things were, and they may as well hang on to them. Perhaps they even deserved them.

Now there were many clever minds, and they kept making things easier. They improved the wheels and the tracks, they made safety improvements, they made better and faster and safer engines. They improved the carriages, and soon there were second-class carriages which, while not so luxurious as the first-class, accommodated more people. Over time, more and more people moved up into the second-class carriages. Sometimes the first-class and second-class passengers became indistinct; sometimes the second-class and lower-class passengers became indistinct.

The first-class and second-class passengers now equipped themselves with all manner of defences against the oncoming obstacles. They had binoculars, and telescopes, and radar, and satellite, and seismographs, and other navigational equipment. The train was equipped with sensors and shock absorbers, and the engine was equipped with stabilisers and safety features. They looked far ahead for obstacles, far beyond the visible horizon.

But when they looked far enough for obstacles, they could not believe what they saw. They were deeply shocked and disturbed. Some of them did not believe it, but the evidence was clear enough for those who examined it.

For what they saw, was that they were heading straight towards the edge of the world. The world stopped there, it ran out of support, there was nothing to hold up the ground. Rivers flowed off the side; mountains which grew too large there collapsed and fell. There was nothing there, only space; no way to survive; no food, no sustenance; no planet from which to take sustenance. The planet ended there.

And the locomotive, now at incredible velocity, was travelling too fast to turn away. It could not slow down, it could not stop; that would be a disaster. The fact simply was that if it kept going, it would reach the end of the world and fall off - and the whole locomotive would come to an end.

The Promised Land was many things now: it was justice, it was equality, it was knowledge, understanding, it was freedom, compassion, cooperation, diversity and democracy; but still, as always, it was also ultimately survival. And survival was at stake, now, just as it was so long ago.

And so it was, that all this prodigious mass of humanity found itself hurtling towards destruction, careering at breakneck speed toward the end of the world and unable to slow down. To continue as before was certain destruction. Its only hope was to make such improvements to the mechanism, so that it could live under its own power, without external support from the finite world outside.

There were many clever minds, and they started to work on the problem. Many of the first-class passengers refused to believe that anything happened: it was a strange air of detachment from reality that they lived in. But the clever minds started to build new engines, and new attachments for the locomotive. They began to design new, jet engines. They began to design new, rocket engines. They began to build wings, they began to add hydraulics. They began to design computer systems; they began to construct a rudder

All the while, the locomotive only accelerated. All the passengers were well aware they only had one shot at surviving the oncoming abyss; if they fell, there was no second chance. But the technology did not exist; it seemed that there

was no way out. It seemed that, with a smaller vehicle, they had the technology for a small number to survive; but for all to survive, miraculous advances were required it. But nobody panicked. They all seemed strangely assured; they had somehow managed to survive in the past.

Circumstances could only dictate one plan, which was extraordinary in its audacity and improbability. Wings would be attached to the locomotive; enormous wings and flaps and jet and rocket engines, and the whole vehicle, the whole enormous locomotive, with all the mass of humanity on board, would have to take off, and survive, under its own power, without external help from the world, which was running out. The whole ungainly, intricately complicated contraption would attempt to take off, to soar above the world, to soar beyond the world, so that the mass of humanity could take up its place as a citizen of the universe, a mature society, mutually supporting itself. The Promised Land, or death.

The locomotive would groan, it would shiver and shudder and convulse with the stress and the new levels of velocity and energy and volatility involved in this apparently foolhardy enterprise - an audacity that was, in the end, a necessity. It might glide upwards into the heavens and reach the Promised Land, or it might crash back into the earth which had supported it; or it might simply plough into the abyss.

Nobody was sure. The wings were not yet constructed; the engines were not yet constructed; the technology did not yet exist. But the enormous train, a fuselage without aerodynamics and without wings, was already accelerating for the takeoff, it was past the point of no return, and had committed itself either to transition to a new phase of organisation, or to a dismal and meaningless end.

It will be seen which comes to pass.