

# The Future Is Calling Us to Greatness

with Michael Dowd + 56 Experts



## Gracefully Navigating the Long Emergency

with James Howard Kunstler

Big ideas from this session:

- The Geography of Nowhere and Home from Nowhere: social insanity and path of recovery
- The Long Emergency and how to live a meaningful life of service to the future
- Surviving the end of oil, climate change, and other converging catastrophes of the 21st century

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Michael: I'm just delighted that you're willing and able to have this conversation. This topic of the future calling us to greatness, the longer version is the past is rooting for us and the future is calling us to greatness. It's just giving me a great opportunity to talk with people like yourself who've been doing a lot of thinking and writing and speaking on this, the topic of humanity's relationship to the world and to the future.

I'd like to begin by some people aren't going to be as familiar as others in terms of your work, your accomplishments, your contributions. Could you just give our viewers and listeners a sense of who James Howard Kunstler is and what you've contributed and what you're passionate about?

James: Well, I like to call myself a full-service writer. I published about, I don't know, 17 or 18 books. About 11 or 12 or more of them, I've lost count, are novels. Another whole bunch of them are non-fiction. A lot of those novels were kind of my early first-phase of my career. They're not too well known, they're mostly out of print.

I guess I started to come to the public's attention with a book published in 1993 called *The Geography of Nowhere*. That was an examination of the fiasco of suburbia, as I like to call it. That got me involved with a reform organization, a reform movement called the New Urbanism. I wrote a couple more books on the subject of the human habitat in America, how to remedy the fiasco of suburbia. That was the subject of a book called *Home From Nowhere*.

Then I wrote a book called *The City in Mind: Notes on the Urban Condition*. That was sort of a discussion of exactly what the subtitle says. In the course of doing that I couldn't fail to notice that we were running into a problem with fossil fuels as the way that we ran our living arrangement. At the same time in the mid-90s something happened.

A group of senior geologists started to drop out, retire from the oil industry. They started to publish their dark and secret thoughts about what was going on. They might have just remained in obscure journals and monographs but the phenomenon of the internet was rising at the same time.

These ideas which really came to be called peak oil came to the attention of a lot of people and spread through the internet. I think a good thing that they did because we were, indeed, facing a pretty serious predicament with the question of how we were going to run this society that we have ramped up.

That prompted me to write a book called *The Long Emergency* which came out finally in 2005.

Michael: Jim, let me just jump in for one second and say -

James: I'm sorry if I'm going on too long.

Michael: No, no, no, this is great. I just wanted to mention that Connie and I, my wife and I travel all over North America speaking in churches and colleges and that sort of thing.

The main way we keep ourselves in gas and food money in addition to the honorarium is by selling what we consider the cream of the crop in terms of books and DVDs related to the topics that we speak about. Your book *The Long Emergency* has actually kept us in gas and food money, so thank you.

James: Thank you. I guess it's kept me in a little gas and food money, too, so good for both of us.

Michael: While the gas lasts.

James: Yes. I wrote that book and it got a certain amount of attention. I hasten to add that a number of other people wrote books about the same issues in their own style around the same time. Richard Heinberg published *The Party's Over*. A chap at USC, a physicist wrote another good one. His name escapes me at the moment. A number of other people were writing about this subject and so people started to become aware of it.

After I wrote that I wrote a couple of novels set in the American post-petroleum future. The first was called *World Made By Hand* and the second was called *The Witch of Hebron*. I've just finished the third of what will be four altogether, one for each of the four seasons. The third one will come out in September of 2014. It's called *History of the Future*.

Then based on what was I was seeing around the country, because I travel a lot too, after *The Long Emergency* came out I became aware of the fact that the delusional thinking in the United States was extraordinary. We were going through a really amazing period of delusional thinking, basically believing in things that aren't true.

Michael: Especially what you and John Michael Greer both refer to as sort of a myth of perpetual progress.

James: Yes, sure. I wrote a book about that particular problem that was called *Too Much Magic*. The subtitle of that was *Technology, Wishful Thinking and the Fate of the Nation*.

It seemed to me that the whole country was sitting around waiting for some Silicon Valley geek to invent a rescue remedy so we could keep on driving to Wal-Mart forever. That's what I considered the master wish. I call that the master wish in America today, which is to keep driving to Wal-Mart forever.

We're going to be disappointed about how that works out. I don't know if we're going to answer the call of history. So far we're a little bit too preoccupied with the Kardashians and other trivialities.

Michael: I couldn't agree more. One of the things that I've appreciated about your work, a little bit in *The Long Emergency* but also in some of the other works you've mentioned, is your critique of suburbia and promoting of a much more simple, community-based lifestyle. Can you say a little bit about that?

James: Yes, suburbia can be defined in many ways. There are two ways that I think are important if you're really going to understand it. One is it's the greatest misallocation of resources in the history of the world. Another way of understanding it is it's a living arrangement with no future.

Now, unfortunately, America is kind of stuck with it. One of the missing modules of a liberal education these days is the idea that life is tragic. By that I don't mean that everything has an unhappy ending. I mean that there are consequences if you make bad decisions. America's made a lot of bad decisions.

I hasten to add also that the decision to build suburbia was not really a conspiracy. It was more of a consensus than a conspiracy. All that says is societies can make poor choices collectively, and we did.

Now we're kind of stuck with it and it has provoked what I call a psychology of previous investment, meaning that we've put so much of our national treasure into this way of life with no future that we can't imagine letting go of it or reforming it or getting away from it.

I think what's going to happen is going to surprise people. Many of them may be surprised at the failure of suburbia. Of course, it has three destinies for the most part: slums, salvage and ruins. Some of it is going to be retrofitted and fixed but most of it won't.

The cities are going to get in as much trouble as the suburbs because they've gotten too big and they're not scaled to the energy and capital formation realities of the future. We're going to see them contract hugely and that will entail a whole lot of social distress and loss of wealth and political problems.

Where will everybody end up? My notion is this, that because we're going to also get into a lot of trouble with industrial agriculture that food production is going to have to change. We're obviously going to have to do that differently. Like all the other parts of the predicament that we're faced with it implies downscaling and relocalizing everything we do.

As that occurs I think you'll see several phenomena. One is that the places that have a meaningful relationship with farming are going to regain importance. I think that farming and food production and the activities that can grow out of that are going to come closer to the center of economic life than they have in generations.

Michael: I agree.

James: I think that a lot of our small towns, the places that are in the worst kind of isolation and disinvestment now, are going to revive. I don't think that everybody's going to flee suburbia and move to the city. In fact, if that happens that would be yet another tragedy. Places like Dallas and Minneapolis and Atlanta, you name it. There's a lot of misunderstanding about this.

A very nice fellow named David Owen who writes for The New Yorker wrote a piece about, I don't know, eight or ten years ago to the effect that Manhattan was the greenest living arrangement in the USA. Well, it's just not true. It would be nice to think so but his idea was that if you could stack people up in 70-story skyscrapers they would just occupy a smaller footprint. It ain't going to work out that way.

What we're going to discover, first of all, is that skyscrapers or towers or mega structures, whatever you want to call them, are obsolete. Not only because of the electrical requirements for heating and ventilation and air conditioning, well not so much heating but air conditioning and ventilation. The elevators require very little energy, actually, as a point of fact.

The reason that they're going to be obsolete is that the capital and the resources won't be there to renovate them ever again. Manhattan is full of buildings that seem to be great right now but they will turn out to be white elephants. They're going to turn out to be liabilities not assets. This will come as a complete surprise and shock to 99.9% of the educated people in New York, including the architects.

Of course, the architects have an interest in, as they say, maximizing the floor to area ratio of a given building lot so they're delighted to build skyscrapers because their commissions multiply exponentially. Again, life is tragic and just because we do stupid things doesn't mean that we get away with it. Eventually there are consequences. That was a very long-winded answer to your question.

Michael: That's okay. One of the things that I've found as I talk to people about these issues, peak oil, climate change, some of the as you say converging crises of the 21st century, is that if you don't buy this idea that things are going to keep getting better and better and technologies are going to save our ass, you're almost immediately lumped into the camp of -

James: Doomer.

Michael: Yes, exactly, doom and gloomer or apocalyptic person.

James: That's partly because we live in a culture where it's more important to make people feel good than it is to get in tune with reality.

Michael: I agree. Could you just distinguish for our viewers and listeners a little bit the difference between what I would say is a sobering assessment of trends that are clearly coming down the pike and what we're likely to experience in the next decade and much further out, the distinction between that and the sort of apocalyptic, end of the world kind of thing?

James: Well, the reason I wrote my *World Made By Hand* novels was to depict a post-petroleum world that would not be so terrible. It's still much harsher than most people would care for. The electricity's not on and the internet is no longer with us and people aren't ordering a lot of stuff from Williams-Sonoma.

They're managing to live in a new and different economy, an economy which in many ways has kind of returned to older models of human activity. They still find joy, they still find purpose in

life, perhaps even more than they did before in the vacuum of humanity that is a diminishing return of all the technological crap that we surround ourselves with.

Personally I believe that that's the most plausible future for us if we don't blow ourselves up or outside of some other black swan kind of thing. I would also caution people to reflect on the idea that there's your individual point of view, which is how you're disposed to think about where you're at in history or in your own community or in your country.

Then there's the whole question of the consensus and I'm very concerned about the consensus than whether individual people are gloomy or pessimistic. It's more a question of what are we going to do collectively.

There's a lot of evidence out there that we're doing a pretty poor job of standing up for the future. One of the ones that I discuss a lot is the fact that we desperately need to rebuild the conventional railroad system in America.

The likelihood is that commercial aviation is not going to be what it has been for us. I think that in 10 or 15 years it will disappear altogether. The commercial model for running it has already failed. All of these companies have been in and out of bankruptcy. They probably can't merge more times. They've done all the mergers, they've fired all the non-essential employees, they've offloaded all the pensions. I don't think they can do much more of that so we're going to see that wither.

I don't think there's any question that the happy motoring, mass motoring system is going to wither and go away. By the way, we need to understand that it's not just about the fuel that you put in the vehicles.

These quixotic ventures like Elon Musk's Tesla adventure, which is another exercise in techno-narcissism and delusional thinking, wishful thinking, the idea that we're going to electrify the whole automobile system is not consistent with reality. It ain't going to happen.

A better way of understanding this is also getting with the program and understanding that happy motoring will probably fail on the financial basis before it even fails on the fuel basis because we are now having so many problems with capital formation at \$100 plus a barrel oil. The money to loan people for buying cars is not going to be there for car loans. That's how Americans are used to buying cars.

What you'll see is incrementally fewer and fewer Americans. By the way, this is accompanied by the impoverishment of the middle class. Fewer and fewer Americans will be able to buy vehicles the way Americans have been used to doing it for 70 years. That will probably be really the key thing.

Another element of it that people don't consider is many, if not most or all, municipalities are either broke or strapped for money, as are the state governments and the federal government could probably make a case that it's technically bankrupt. I don't think we're going to be able to keep maintaining this elaborate network of roadways that we have built over the last 100 years. That's an additional problem.

We're going to see a triage of the road system. We're going to have to make choices about which roads get resurfaced and which ones we just forget about, which bridges, etcetera. Anyway, that's another long-winded answer so there you go.

Michael: This is good, Jim. One of the things that I'd like to sort of help our audience get a sense of, for you and I we've been reading a lot and speaking on peak oil. For some people that are part of this, because this series is being produced by an organization that's done a lot of personal growth and empowerment kinds of stuff there may be some people that just really need a peak oil 101, sort of why does this guy sound so doom and gloomy?

For somebody who doesn't get these challenges, these trends, peak oil and others, could you just sort of give and take as long as you want to the elementary version of why the next 10 or 20 years is not likely to be rosy and it's likely to be very, very challenging? Give some sense of why that's the case for people who aren't up to speed on this.

James: It's really pretty simple. We have constructed an infrastructure for daily life that depends on petroleum. Petroleum is just getting more expensive and there's a certain threshold above which the economy just doesn't work. We're at that threshold.

We're at a point of that threshold where it's showing up mostly in the financial system, because the financial system being the most abstract and the most fragile of our systems is the first one that is likely to wobble. It is and that's visible in the 2008 crash and all of the things that have emanated out of it, including the machinations by the banking system and the Federal Reserve and other authorities to try and offset our inability to grow in the conventional way anymore economically by just issuing more and more fake money.

The financial system is really the canary in the coal mine but it's also such a powerful part of daily life that if it fails a lot of other things are going to fail, too. Really you have all of these systems that are tied together. You have basically a network of complex system that are tied together. You can describe them with precision, there's nothing metaphysical about it.

There's the agriculture system. Agri-biz or industrial agriculture, if that fails then people are going to starve. There's the transportation system. If we can't get on airplanes and drive our cars we're not going anywhere in a very large continental nation. There's the commerce system, which today mostly is represented by big box shopping at Wal-Mart. We've

got to reimagine that and rebuild that. The mall of the future is probably going to be Main Street. Most of America doesn't know that. Most of America doesn't understand how fragile Wal-Mart is.

Anyway, all these systems are interdependent. If they all go down or fall apart fairly rapidly it's going to cause a lot of disorder in American life and both social and political disorder. I think that that's self-explanatory. If it gets really bad then you're living in a very, very bad period of history.

As for the oil itself, I have found that there's a very simple way to present an understanding of the difference between where we were at before and where we're at now. It's as simple as this.

The conventional oil before the 21st century, let's say you have east Texas, sweet, light, crude oil. It costs \$400,000 in today's money to drill a well for that. It comes out of the ground under its own pressure. You don't have to go in there and goose it out in any way, it doesn't require anything. It produces thousands of barrels a day for 30 years. That's what we've had to work with from about 1900 until about 2005.

Now we have something else. We're depending on unconventional oil as represented by, say, the North Dakota Bakken shale oil. Now that stuff costs between six to 12 million dollars to drill a Bakken well in today's money as opposed to \$400,000. You have to go through elaborate fracking procedures to goose the oil out of the tight rock. It produces, on average, 100 barrels a day per well and only for the first year because it falls by at least half the first year and three years later it's out.

You compare 30 years of thousands of barrels of oil a day from each well with four years of 100 barrels a day or less with tremendous costs associated with it. There's no comparison.

I think what we'll see is that we were able to ramp up this shale thing as a kind of desperate demonstration project but it ain't going to pencil out economically. Sooner or later it will be starved for capital to continue doing these operations.

Michael: I agree. Jim, for somebody who hasn't already allowed themselves to feel the anger, the grief, the sadness, the emotions that come with realizing that our American fantasy cannot continue, and not just American but global industrial way of being, that can be pretty overwhelming and scary. What is it that inspires you and gives you hope or at least what is it that keeps you waking up each day to contribute towards a healthy future, to play some role in that process?

James: Well, first of all, by disposition I'm a cheerful person. I'm not prone to being a depressive. I lead a very purposeful life, which is something that a lot of Americans for one reason or another have not managed to be able to find their way to do in our ridiculous culture and ridiculous economy and this society of clowns that we're now living in. That's unfortunate but, again, life is tragic.

I like to write my books and I like to write my blog and I like to do all of this stuff. I have a certain malicious sense of humor that keeps me going and I like to piss people off and make them laugh. I get a kick out of that. I like to get paid and I get paid for writing. I don't get paid a huge amount. I'm not rich. I like that.

I've made certain choices in my own life that are working out okay. I live on three acres. I have planted about 30 fruit trees including, just this week, six new plum trees.

Michael: Really? Wow. For people that don't know it, you live in northeast of Albany, south of Lake Champlain?

James: Wedged up between Saratoga Springs and the Vermont border, north of Albany. We're having our first spring day today, as a matter of fact. I was out in the garden just a few minutes ago before we started talking getting the hoses out and putting the snow blower back in the shed and bringing other stuff out.

I like what I'm doing. I like gardening. I like planting and growing fruit trees. I like the prospect of all of this. I'm doing this on a piece of property that is actually off the last street in a little factory village in upstate New York. It's a village of about 2,500 people. The economy is completely shot. There used to be three factories here and they're all gone. I don't really know what most of the people do. I think a lot of them are on a government dole of one kind or another. It's pretty pathetic.

The backwaters of America are beginning to look like Kazakhstan or Poland in the 1980s or some kind of desperate, impoverished backwater of civilization. The denizens of many places in America are beginning to show that, too. They're turning into tattooed savages.

Michael: As you were speaking before about the various sectors and the challenges they have and how fragile they are it reminded me of another one of the books that Connie and I sell after our programs by Dmitri Orlov.

James: That's a fabulous book, he's a fabulous writer.

Michael: He is. *The Five Stages of Collapse*.

James: He's really a true artist, a true prose artist. The cockroaches who will be the librarians of the future, I think he'll be one of the major writers of our time.

Michael: The fact that he's experienced in various forms of collapse in the Soviet Union and is able to share from that perspective. I find your writings, his, John Michael Greer, Richard Heinberg to be sort of the most sobering and yet also strangely hopeful in the sense that this deluded way we've been living is not sustainable, it can't continue, it's wreaking havoc with the planet with other species. It has to shift.

In fact, I've come to call what we're up against that we've been out of right relationship to reality. When I speak in religious audiences I use the words God and reality interchangeably, that reality is a secular name for what ancients meant when they used the word God.

We've been out of right relationship to reality. We are about to experience the great reckoning. There's going to be a cost and a consequence. It's not because some supernatural deity has singled us out to punish us. It's that we've been out of alignment with the way things really are and are now about to experience that. Hopefully my vision is that it will be also the great homecoming, humanity coming back into right relationship with reality, even if it takes some hundreds of years.

Could you say a little bit about sort of the vision of how you see? Again, this is scary stuff for people who haven't spent some time with it. As you imagine a post-petroleum, community-based lifestyle give us a sense of a typical day or a typical week in that kind of a context.

James: The people in the fictional town that I've created in *The World Made By Hand* series are living in a small town. The population has been reduced by repeated epidemics. They have lost a lot, including a lot of knowledge, but they have still retained some important things. The village doctor still knows enough to wash his hands before he performs an operation so they're still ahead of where they were in 1863.

There's no internet to rely on. They even have problems with things like clocks. There's only one guy in town who knows how to repair regular, mechanical clocks and they're a little hard to come by. He has old back copies of the almanacs so he has sort of an idea of what time it is on a given day of the year when the sun comes up. He goes around adjusting everybody else's clocks.

One of the criticisms that I got from readers, I don't know if it's a criticism but they were disappointed that I did not depict the future as a utopia of bicycling. The reason for that was pretty simple. I don't think that we're going to have the kind of advanced alloy metals that are required to make the sort of bicycles that people take for granted these days, which

actually require a lot of advanced metallurgy. As well as roadwork. I think that we're just not going to have the material for that.

What's more, in *World Made By Hand* and the other books I depict the pavements and the roadways as being pretty bad, pretty broken up. There's nobody who's been fixing them for quite a while. It doesn't take long in my part of the country for the pavements really to go to hell.

These people I depict the economy as being centered on agriculture. The people who are wealthy in that new society are the successful farmers who have, as I imagined it, acquired a lot more land and have found a new way of organizing labor.

There are about two or three different models in the books. One of them is represented by a kind of snarky gentleman named Mr. Bullock who basically has become a feudal lord. He has taken into his care and keeping about 60 people who have lost their vocations and their way of life. The pharmacists who no longer can be pharmacists and the insurance salesman in an economy with no insurance salesmen.

These guys are now working on his farm and he's allowed them to build a village for themselves on this property. He's acquired a lot of the property of the failed farmers around him. That's one model.

He's a kind of a reluctant despot. Not all bad. What I wanted to illustrate there is one of the things that could come out of this would be a new form of feudalism in which people sell their allegiance to somebody with land and somebody with power for shelter and food and a way of life.

Another element of that part of the story is that these people are very conscious of the fact that the other amenity that they get with shelter and food is they lead an ordered existence. They know what they're going to do from day to day, they know who to answer to, there's a hierarchy.

I had to really thrash out some sticky issues of hierarchy and authority. In our current egalitarian society where there is very little respect of authority really and no sense that either, A, it's necessary or, B, that there may even be some good things about it we're going to find out that actually you probably do need somebody to tell other people what to do.

There's a lot of space between a local farming honcho and Adolf Hitler, if you know what I mean. Also, in *World Made By Hand III*, the book that's coming out in September, one of the central episodes takes place where one of my characters has left town and traveled to the center of the country to a breakaway white supremacist nation that calls itself the Foxfire Republic. Run by a former country western singer/evangelist lady who I have described as Dolly Parton meets Hitler.

Michael: Oh, God.

James: That's one possible outcome. I've alluded to that in several of my books. I call that corn pone Nazism. That's certainly a possibility in the United States. Just because we haven't experienced it so far doesn't mean that in an emergency or a long period of hardship.

My own sense of things is that Americans have been so careless and so lax and so complacent and so foolish that we will reach a certain inflection point where they will beg somebody to push them around and tell them what to do. That could be a great danger to us politically.

Michael: That was depicted in the movie *V for Vendetta*.

James: Well, I guess it was. I don't remember it that well. That took place in England.

Michael: Exactly. Jim, what do you see being done? I would have difficulty answer this question myself because I don't see a whole lot of really great things being done. What are some things that are being done that give you some sense of home or at least is in the right direction? What would you suggest are some of the biggest things that we need to do and need to do soon?

James: I think very little is being done. I think the idea that we're going to run Wal-Mart, Walt Disney World, suburbia, the US military and the interstate highway system on renewable energy is a joke and it ain't going to happen. We have to change our living arrangements drastically and we're not interested in having that conversation.

Right now I think you can state with the exception of a few activists and transition town people and a small, tiny minority of the American public who's interested and paying attention, we're not really doing anything. As a matter of consensus, meaning an agreed upon agenda, there's absolutely nothing going on.

I return to this thing about the railroad system. That is a no-brainer. It would be relatively, compared to the other things that we fantasize about like the electric car and all of that, we desperately need to fix the American railroad system.

We're not going to build a high-speed system. We missed the window of opportunity for that. We're now in the scarce capital situation despite the BS that you hear about liquidity and a lot of fast money and hot money traveling around the world looking for investment. In point of fact, we're starved for real investment money. It's desperately important that we do that.

The idea has not even entered the political arena from people you'd think would be interested. Where's Bernie Sanders on that issue? Where are the so-called, self-identified progressives?

They're not talking about that. That issue has got to be dragged into the political arena real fast. The fact that we're not doing it shows we are a completely unserious people and a completely unserious nation.

Michael:       Unserious or perhaps addicted.

James:         Well, to me, I don't know.

Michael:       We're addicted to television, we're addicted to news, all these things that play on our instincts. The whole 24 news cycle and internet porn, internet gaming and television. There are so many things that we're evolutionarily programmed to pay attention to and to want that our time and energy is wasted. We can ignore the really important things because we're paying attention to episodic trivia.

James:         Yes, unfortunately I think the reality-based answer to that is boo-hoo, okay? Boo-hoo. This is not the time to be a crybaby. We may be deprived on account of we're deprived or deprived on account of we're deprived, to quote that old line from *West Side Story*. We don't have time to be crybabies anymore.

One of the really harsh answers to that, which people really don't want to hear, is that Americans have to man up. We have to break out of what has become a feminized culture in which making people feel good about stuff is more important than doing stuff. We've got to get back in touch with the idea that it's not the thought that counts, that wishing for something is not the same thing as accomplishing it.

Unfortunately that's the kind of culture we're stuck in. I don't see any prospects that we're going to break out of that right away. If we do it's going to be very hard.

I got a lot of flak from female readers about the social disposition of things in *World Made By Hand* because I came to the conclusion whether it makes people feel good or not that the feminist revolution is probably not going to continue as it's currently being experienced, for certain practical reasons.

There will be no more glass ceilings to break through. The gigantic armature of institutional and corporate life is probably going to crumble. We're not going to be living and working in those kinds of large organizations.

We're also going to be in a situation where a lot of work cannot just be done by anybody. We're probably going to see gender-based work assignments again that are going to disturb people. That's the reality-based future that we're moving into. I'm sorry if it makes some people feel bad, but boo-hoo.

Michael: Jim, give us a sense of your trajectory, a little piece of your life story. Not the whole thing, obviously. Just how did you come to have the engagements, the passion, the involvements that you now have? Give us a little sense of that trajectory.

James: My parents moved out to the Long Island suburbs in 1954. I experienced that as a child from the age of five until the age of eight. My parents split up and I moved into the middle of Manhattan with my mom. The rest of my childhood was spent in the biggest city in the United States with all of its charms and attractions and drawbacks, etcetera, and all of its cultural opportunities and all of its cultural liabilities.

When I was a kid growing up in New York, especially when I was a teenager, the only things that I really wanted to do were the things I couldn't do. I wanted to go bass fishing, ride motorcycles and go out with girls named Alice. The only thing I could do in New York City was go to museums or Yankee Stadium and date girls who didn't have any vowels in their names. There were drawbacks to that.

I went to college. I was a bad student in high school. I went to college in a little rum-dum campus of the State University of New York in western New York. I actually loved it. I loved being away from New York City. I loved being in the provinces and I fell in love with small town, Main Street America. I lived there for a while.

After college I lived in a bunch of cities. I was a journalist so I lived in Boston, Washington, San Francisco. I dropped out of corporate journalism in the '70s. I figured I got about as far as I was going to get being an editor at Rolling Stone magazine. I dropped out to write books.

I moved to a Main Street town in upstate New York called Saratoga Springs, where I hunkered down to be a starving Bohemian. I wasn't disappointed because I was still waiting on tables after my eighth book came out. I had published eight novels and I was still waiting on tables. Which illustrates something that I tell wannabe writers who as me, "How do I become a writer?" I give them the difficult news to digest that perseverance counts even more than talent.

Anyway, from there on I just kept on writing books and here I am. I was in Saratoga for over 30 years. I moved out here three years ago, 15 miles east of Saratoga. I'm still in the orbit of that town which is still a wonderful place to live.

Michael: When did you meet Jennifer along that trajectory?

James: Well, actually I'm divorced from Jennifer.

Michael: Oh gosh, okay, I wasn't aware of that.

James: Yes, I'm divorced from Jennifer and I cycled through a couple of girlfriends since then. I've had a checkered romantic life but I remain optimistic. Was it Samuel Johnson that said about marriage, about the second or third marriage is a triumph of hope over experience? I don't know.

Michael: One of the questions that Connie has given me to ask my guests in this series that I thought was a great one, she said, "Don't tell everyone you're going to ask this beforehand," so that's why I didn't do so. If you had the opportunity to have dinner or a beer or whatever, but to get together and talk over a meal or a brew or something with three people throughout human history, it could be somebody alive today that you've never met, but three people. Who would they be and why would you like to have a meal or a beer with them?

James: Well, I think I would like to have a meal or a beer with Julius Caesar, Albert Einstein and Mark Twain for leavening.

Michael: Somehow I knew you were going to say Twain. I don't know why. Say a little bit about why each of those.

James: HL Mencken would do as a pinch hitter because he was such a wonderful, humorous writer. I think Albert Einstein had really the best attitude of any of the major geniuses of human history. He was extremely humble about himself and about his ideas. He reserved a certain amount of skepticism about his own ideas about reality. He had tremendous compassion for the human race.

I'm interested in Julius Caesar because he was such an extraordinary leader and occupied a tremendous inflection point in one of the other great civilizations of human history, or really the great turning point of the Roman Empire where it went from the republic to being an empire.

Mark Twain not just because he was a brilliantly amusing fellow but because he represents a period of American history and western history that I regard as being really the height of civilization. That is the Beaux-Arts period of western life that ran roughly from about 1890 to the early 1900s. That was when some of the best things that were ever produced by western culture were produced.

Unfortunately that era came to an end with the first World War and the first industrial slaughter of human beings on that scale. I think my theory has always been that World War I was kind of the nervous breakdown for industrial civilization. There was a great dividing line between what came before and what came after.

I only want to mention one other thing about history which I think is important. The cat's tail is passing through the camera. Did you see it?

Michael: Yes, I did.

James: He's marching around on my desk. I've developed a new theory of history. It's pretty simple. People wonder why stuff happens. I think it's really pretty simple. Mostly things happen for good or for bad and for mega good and for mega bad because they seem like a good idea at the time.

That's what has happened with us. It seemed like a good idea to build suburbia. It seemed like a good idea to become addicted to petroleum because at one point we seemed to have an endless supply of it. It seemed to be a good idea to motorize the entire nation and make people dependent on their cars all the time. It seemed like a good idea to get people hooked into the internet so that they're robbed of all the hours of the day when they could be doing real things.

The fact is that these things have all produced tremendous blow back. Part of the blow back is that we've become kind of intellectually crippled to the degree that we don't even see the blow back. We don't understand the diminishing returns and the repercussions and consequences of the bad choices we've made.

As I said, life is tragic. History is merciless. History doesn't care if we pound our society down a rat hole.

Michael: Wow. Well, Jim, for the average person just watching or listening to this on this theme, one of the things that I come back to in my work is helping people to have the big picture, to be able to look at the past and the future from a large scale perspective, big history. I sometimes call myself a big history evangelist as sharing this epic of evolution or big history in a way that helps people see that they're part of this enormous. That we are the universe becoming conscious of itself, that we're the result of billions of years of creativity but also billions of years of suffering and struggle and pain. If it weren't for that struggle and those sacrifices we wouldn't exist.

With some sense of the past, there's actually a meditation that I sometimes do with audiences where I invite them to imagine some being in the past, some ancestor sort of rooting them on and what would they be saying. Then some being 100 or further years out that's communicating some encouragement for how to live and what to be engaged in, how to prioritize our lives in this day.

On this theme of the past is rooting for us and The Future is Calling Us to Greatness, if you're going to offer coaching or a piece of advice to some young person watching

this or listening to this that would be an encouragement to step into their own greatness or their own contribution or whatever, what would you say to someone? What would you say to the young person today?

James: I think that the basis of a purposeful life is just getting your stuff done and making sure that you do it and not making excuses about it. I believe that joy and beauty and love are available to us even in times when things seem dark and harsh. I believe in seeking them out and welcoming them and being ready for them. I guess that's about it.

We all have the same ultimate destination, which is that our spirits and our material constituent parts return to the great ether of stuff out there. I am aware generally, although I'm not a religious person, I'm aware of the fact that I'm not necessarily the transmitter. I'm just the receiver in the radio. I'm not tortured by feelings of my fears of going to hell or going to judgment or any of those things.

I don't think that nature is necessarily benign in the sort of mushy sense. I do have some perhaps irrational feeling that we matter to the universe. I get a lot of consolation from that.

What I try to avoid is just making excuses for myself, wringing my hands and being a crybaby. I'm susceptible to feeling pity for myself but when that happens, like last year when they cut my chest open and stopped my heart for four hours I just said, "I'm going to have a little pity party. Boo hoo. Then I'll get over it and I'll go out and plant some more fruit trees." That's pretty much my philosophy of life in its own shredded, ragged presentation.

Michael: Cool. For somebody wanting to go further into your work, your website is just [Kunstler.com](http://Kunstler.com)? Is that correct?

James: It is correct. They can just do a search on Amazon for me and all my books will come up, the ones that are still in print. I want to remind listeners that *World Made By Hand III* is coming out in September. It's called *This History of the Future*. I am now writing *World Made By Hand IV*, the last of the series, one for each of the four seasons.

Michael: That's great. This interview series will probably air right around Thanksgiving, so actually it'll already be out by the time most people experience this.

James: They can buy it for Christmas, if they have any cash left.

Michael: That's a perfect segue into what I had forgot that I wanted to ask you. Your sort of end of year or beginning of year on your blog, which is of course Clusterfuck Nation, I love the title.

James: Are we allowed to say that? I don't know.

Michael: I don't know, I think so. In any case, you've made what people could identify as failed projections or failed predictions or whatever. I saw that you just wrote something that was posted up on Chris Martenson's site but I haven't read it yet. Say a little bit about the content of that piece and why just because predictions or a sense of what's coming, the timing isn't perfect, that that doesn't mean we still shouldn't be concerned?

James: You put yourself out there when you're making predictions about a particular year or something. That makes you susceptible to being thought of as a crank or an idiot. I don't predict too many things specifically. I do flatly predict the end of commercial aviation.

I had thought that the financial markets and the banks would be in more visible distress sooner than they have been, but there's plenty of time for that to happen.

I think Chris Martenson himself, whose website I often write essays for, says it best. He would rather take the risk of looking a little silly than miss the greater truth in what he's saying, that we do face a series of cascading inter-related predicaments that are going to change the course of what we think of now as history. This ceaseless path of technological, wondrous, magic progress that we think we're on and that things are going to change for a while and we've got to get with reality.

I don't know, I'm not too disturbed about that. I don't run around with what little hair I have on fire because people think that I'm wrong or they don't want to hear the message or any of that. I am very interested in what reality has to say to us. I'm more interested in what circumstances are telling us and what events are telling us than whether people are making fun of me.

Michael: I'm with you.

James: I'm okay with that.

Michael: Chris' website is Resilience.org?

James: No, that's Kurt Cobb.

Michael: Okay. What's Chris Martenson's website?

James: He changed it from The Crash Course to now PeakProsperity.com.

Michael: That's right, PeakProsperity.com.

James: Chris is really trying to put across the idea that in shorthand that it's conceivable to thrive in the very different economy ahead. It doesn't necessarily mean the death, demise and hardship of everybody but it probably will take some positioning for people to make the right decisions. If you decide you're going to move to Dallas, probably not a good idea. If you decide that you're going to plant some fruit trees and have a garden on your property, that may be a better idea, and so on.

Michael: That's great. Jim, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us and just blessings on your work. I think it's just vitally important. I'll send you the link and all the other information about this. You'll always have access to this interview and anybody on the list and that sort of thing.

James: Okay, yes, I'll look forward to it. It's been a pleasure talking to you, Mike.

Michael: Same here, Jim.