

Walking North on A Southbound Train

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Trading stories one day about animal smarts, I heard one from an old farmer who described a wily fox that appeared one day at the edge of a clearing in which his dog was tethered to pole in the yard. Inferring from the pattern of tracks, the empty dog dish, and the fact that the dog was bound up to the pole he deduced that the fox had run in circles just outside the radius of the dog's tether until he had tied the dog up at which point he strutted in to devour the dog's food while the helpless mutt looked on. Something like that has happened to all of us who believe nature and ecosystems to be worth preserving and that this is a matter of obligation, spirit, true economy, and common sense. Someone or something has run us in circles, tied us up, and is eating our lunch. It is time to ask who and why and how we might respond. Here is what we know:

1. Despite occasional success, overall, we are losing the epic struggle to preserve the habitability of the Earth. The overwhelming fact is that virtually all important ecological indicators are in decline. The human population increased three-fold in the 20th century and will likely grow further before leveling off at 8-11 billion. The loss of species continues and will likely increase in coming decades. Human driven climatic change is now underway and is occurring more rapidly than many scientists thought possible even a few years ago. There is no political or economic movement presently underway sufficient to stop the process short of a doubling or tripling of the background rate of 280 ppm CO₂. On the horizon are other threats to humanity and nature in the form of self-replicating technologies that may place humankind and natural systems in even greater jeopardy.
2. The forces of denial in the United States are more militant and brazen than ever before. Every day millions in this country alone hear that those concerned about the environment are "wackos" or worse. A former Wyoming senator charges that the environmental movement is "a front for these terrorists" and no significant Washington politician utters any objection ([Walkom, 2002](#), F-4). And people holding such opinions have been appointed to strategic positions throughout the federal government.
3. The movement to preserve a habitable planet is caught in the cross-fire between fundamentalists of the corporate dominated global economy and those of atavistic religious movements. It is far easier to see the latter than the former, but in a longer perspective those of perpetual economic expansion will be perceived to be at least as dangerous as are those of a purely religious sort. That danger is now magnified by a new right-wing doctrine having the status of

national policy that permits the U.S. to strike preemptively at any country deemed to be an enemy without resort to international law, morality, common sense, or public debate. In the words of one analyst, this is "a strategy to use American military force to permit the continued offloading onto the rest of the world of the ecological costs of the existing US economy -- without any short-term sacrifices on the part of US capitalism, the US political elite or US voters" ([Lieven, 2002](#)).

4. Fundamentalists of either kind require dependably loathsome enemies. For Osama bin Laden, the United States and George W. Bush admirably serve that purpose. It is no less true that the foundering presidency of Mr. Bush was revitalized by the activities of Mr. Bin Laden and subsequently by the less agreeable attributes of Saddam Hussein. Each is fulfilled and defined by an utterly vile enemy.
5. There has been a steep erosion of democracy and civil liberties, in the U.S. driven by what former president, Jimmy Carter describes as "a core group of conservatives who are trying to realize long-pent-up ambitions under the cover of the proclaimed war against terrorism" ([Carter, 2002](#)). There is a strong anti-democratic movement on the right wing of American politics that would limit voting rights, reduce access to information, prevent full disclosure of matters about the conduct of the public business, and public control of military affairs.
6. In the decade of the 1990's massive amounts of wealth was transferred from the poor and middle classes to the richest. By one estimate "the financial wealth of the top 1% exceeds the combined household financial wealth of the bottom 95%" ([Gates, 2002](#), p. 4). Much of this transfer of wealth was simply theft. In the [California energy `crisis'](#) alone, an estimated \$30 billion was diverted by those utilities that effectively defrauded the State and its citizens.
7. For nearly a quarter century, government at all levels has been under constant attack by the extreme right-wing with the clear intention of eroding our capacity to forge collective solutions. The assumption is now common that markets are `moral,' but that publicly created political solutions are not. The result is a continuation of what a Republican president, Teddy Roosevelt, once described as "a riot of individualistic materialism, under which complete freedom for the individual . . . turned out in practice to mean perfect freedom for the strong to wrong the weak" (quoted in [Meine, 2002](#), 4).

8. The strategy, once revealed by Ronald Reagan's director of the Office of the Budget, David Stockman, has been to cut taxes for corporations and the wealthy and [increase military spending](#) thereby creating a severe fiscal crisis that requires cutting expenditures for health, education, mass-transit, the environment, and cities.
9. Our problems are systemic in nature and will have to be solved at the system level.
10. There are yet good possibilities to avert the worst of what may lie ahead.

In short, the movement to preserve the habitability of the Earth is in failure mode and we ought to ask why. The reasons can be found neither in the lack of effort or good intention by thousands of scientists, activists, and concerned citizens, nor in a lack of information, data, logic, and scientific evidence. On these counts the movement has grown impressively as has the quality and quantity of scientific evidence and rational discourse on which it rests. But we must look more deeply at how this is manifest in the larger arena in which public attitudes are formed and the way in which this influences the conduct of the public business.

We are in failure mode, first, because for twenty years or longer, we have tried to be reasonable on their terms, in the belief that we could persuade the powerful if we only offered enough reason, data, evidence, and logic. We have quantified the decline of species, ecosystems, and now planetary systems in exhaustive detail. We bent over backwards to accommodate the style and intellectual predilections of self-described 'conservatives' and those for whom the economy is far more important than the environment in the belief that politeness and good evidence stated in their terms would win the day. Accordingly, we put the case for the Earth and coming generations in the language of economics, science, and law. With remarkably few exceptions we have been reasonable, erudite, clever, cautiously informative, and, relative to the magnitude of the challenges before us, ineffective. In short, we do science, write books, publish articles, develop professional societies, attend conferences, and converse learnedly. But they do politics, take over the courts ([Buccino et.al., 2001](#)), control the media, and manipulate the fears and resentments endemic to a rapidly changing society.

The movement to preserve a habitable Earth is in failure mode, too, because it is fractured into different factions, groups, and arcane philosophies. In this respect it has come to resemble the 19th century European socialist movement that became bitterly divided into warring factions, each more eager to be right than right and effective. When the world was finally ready for better ideas about how to decently organize industrial society, that movement delivered Bolshevism, and the rest, as they say, is history. The left historically has exhausted itself in bloody internecine quarrels, the strategy, as David Brower once described it, of drawing the wagons into a circle and shooting inward. The right generally suffers no such fracturing in large part because their agenda is formed around less complicated aims having to do with pecuniary advantage.

Further, I think Jack Turner is right in saying that we are in failure mode because all too often we are complacent and lack passion. "We are," in his words, "a nation of environmental cowards . . . willing to accept substitutes, imitations, semblances, and fakes -- a diminished wild. We accept abstract information in place of personal experience and communication" ([Turner, 1996](#), 21, 25). Effective protest, he continues, "is grounded in anger and we are not (consciously) angry. Anger nourishes hope and fuels rebellion, it presumes a judgment, presumes how things ought to be and aren't, presumes a caring. Emotion remains the best evidence of belief and value. Unfortunately, there is little connection between our emotions and the wild" (21-22). We are endlessly busy trading emails, doing research, writing papers, and attending conferences in exotic places but go into the wild less and less often. We are cut off from the source.

Finally, we are losing because we failed to appreciate the depth of human needs for transcendence and belonging. We have allowed those intending to pillage the last of nature to do so behind the cover of religion, national pride, community, and family. As a result, the majority of U.S. citizens -- even those who regard themselves as 'environmentalists' -- see little conflict with the goals of human domination of nature and the perpetual expansion of the human estate on Earth. As Buddhists would have it, whatever we thought we were doing, we have built a system based on illusion, greed, and ill will disguised by patriotism, religious doctrine, and individualism.

What is to be done? To that question there can be no simple, easy, or definitive answer, but I do think there are some obvious places to begin. The first requires that we take back public words such as "conservative" and "patriot" which have been co-opted and put to no good or accurate use. How is it, for example, that the word 'conservative' came to describe those willing to run irreversible risks with the Earth? Intending to conserve nothing, they are not conservatives but vandals now working at a global scale. How have those driving their sport utility vehicles to the mall, sporting two American flags and a 'god bless America' bumper sticker come to regard themselves as patriots? They are not moved by authentic patriotism at all, but by self-indulgence. For that matter how has the great and noble word 'liberal' been demeaned and slandered as the height of political and intellectual folly? Unable to defend the integrity of words, we cannot defend the Earth or anything else.

The integrity of our common language, however, depends a great deal on the cultivation of discerning intelligence in the public and that requires better education than we now have. But education, has been whittled down to smaller purposes of passing tests and ensuring large 'lifetime earnings' in some part of the global economy. What passes for education has become highly technical and specialized, little of which is aimed to draw out the full human stature of young people. We've become a nation of specialists and technicians, not broadly educated and discerning people. Scholars have been too intent on developing 'professional knowledge,' arcane theories, complicated methodologies, instead of broad knowledge useful to the wider public. Consequently, we have fewer and fewer people who know history, or how the world works as a physical system, or the rudiments of the [constitution](#), or have a respectable political philosophy. We are a people ripe for the plucking.

This leads to a third point. We do not have an environmental crisis so much as we have a political crisis. A great majority of people still wish a decent and habitable world for their descendants but those desires are thwarted by the machinery that ought to connect the popular will to public decisions but no longer does so. We will have to repair and perhaps reinvent the institutions of democratic governance for a global world and that means dealing with issues that the founders of this republic did not and could not have anticipated. The process of political engagement at all levels has become increasingly Byzantine, confusing, and inaccessible. And in the mass consumption society we have all become better consumers than citizens, which is to say, willing participants in our own undoing. The solution, however difficult, is to reconnect people with the political process and government at all levels.

Fourth, it is necessary to expose the mythology that surrounds what Marjorie Kelly calls "the divine rights of capital" and [place democratic controls on corporations](#) and [the movement of capital](#) (Kelly, 2001). We once fought a revolutionary war to [establish political democracy](#) in western societies, but have yet to do so to democratize the workplace and the ownership of capital. These are still governed by the same illogic of unquestioned divine right by which monarchies once ruled. The assumption that corporations are legal persons and thereby beyond effective public scrutiny, control, or law is foolishness and worse. The latest corporate scandals are only that: the latest in a recurring pattern of illegality, self-dealing, and political corruption surpassing even that of [the robber baron era](#). The solution is to [enforce corporate charters](#) as public license to do business on behalf of the public that are revocable if and when the terms of the charter are violated. If private ownership is good thing, it should be widely extended, not restricted to the super wealthy. By the same logic, we must remove the corrupting influence of money from politics beginning with corporate campaign contributions and the hundreds of billions of dollars of public subsidies for cars, highways, fossil fuels, and nuclear power that corrupt the democratic process and public policy.

Fifth, political reform requires an active, engaged, and sometimes enraged citizenry. Compare, for example, the Illinois farmer-citizens who stood for hours to hear Lincoln and Douglas debate issues of slavery and sectionalism in 1858. Those debates were full of careful argument, eloquence, and wit. Those citizens applauded, laughed, and jeered, which is to say that they followed the flow of argument and heard what was being said. Later, some died for and because of those same arguments. They were citizens and were willing to sacrifice a great deal for that privilege. In our time, while the issues have grown to global scale with consequences that extend as far into the future as the mind dares to imagine, political argument is whittled down to sound-bytes fitted in between advertisements. The means whereby citizens are informed have been increasingly monopolized and manipulated. Only half or less of the citizenry bothers to vote. Some believe public apathy and political incompetence to be good or at least tolerable. I do not. Unless we reverse course they will, in time, prove to be the undoing of democratic government and all that depends on a healthy democracy. The nature of what will replace it is already evident: an unconstrained managerial and well-armed plutocracy intent on global plunder.

Sixth, we need a positive strategy that fires the public imagination. The public, I think, knows what we are against, but not what we are for. And there are many things that should be stopped, but what should be started? The answer to that question lies in a more coherent agenda formed around what is being called [ecological design](#) as it applies to land-use, buildings, energy systems, transportation, materials, water, agriculture, forestry, and urban planning. For three decades and longer we have been developing the ideas, science, and technological wherewithal to build a sustainable society. The public knows of these things only in fragments, but not as a coherent and practical agenda -- indeed the only practical course available. That is our fault and we should start now to put a positive agenda before the public that includes the human and economic advantages of better technology, integrated planning, coherent purposes, and foresight.

Finally, we should expect far more of leaders than we presently do. Never has the need for genuine leadership been greater, and seldom has it been less evident. We cannot be ruled by ignorant, malicious, greedy, incompetent, and shortsighted people and expect things to turn out well. If we are to navigate the challenges of the decades ahead, what E. O. Wilson calls "the bottleneck," we will need leaders of great stature, clarity of mind, spiritual depth, courage, and vision. We need leaders who see patterns that connect us across the divisions of culture, religion, geography, and time. We need leadership that draws us together to resolve conflicts, move quickly from fossil fuels to solar power, reverse global environmental deterioration, and empower us to provide shelter, food, medical care, decent livelihood, and education for everyone. We need leadership that is capable of energizing genuine commitment to old and venerable traditions as well as new visions for a global civilization that preserves and honors local cultures, economies, and knowledge.

Imagine a world in which those who purport to lead us must first make a pilgrimage to ground zero at [Hiroshima](#) and publicly pledge "never again." Imagine a world in which those who purport to lead us must go to Auschwitz and the Killing Fields and pledge publicly "never again." Imagine a world in which leaders must go to Bhopal and say to the victims "We are truly sorry. This will never happen again, anywhere." Imagine, too, those pilgrim leaders going to hundreds of places where love, kindness, forgiveness, sacrifice, compassion, wisdom, ecological ingenuity, and foresight have been evident.

Imagine a world in which those who purport to lead us must help identify places around the world degraded by human actions and help initiate their restoration. Some projects might take as long as 1000 years to restore such as: the Aral Sea; the ecology of the Harrapan region in India; the forests of Lebanon; soil fertility in the middle east; the Chesapeake Bay, the North Atlantic cod fishery -- the possibilities are many. Imagine a world in which those who intend to lead help lift our sights above the daily crisis to the far horizon of what could be.

Imagine, too, leaders with the kind of humility demonstrated by Czech President, Vaclav Havel:

In time I have become a good deal less sure of myself, a good deal more humble . . . every day I suffer more and more from stage fright; every day I am more afraid that I won't be up to the job . .

. more and more often, I am afraid that I will fall woefully short of expectations, that I will somehow reveal my own lack of qualifications for the job, that despite my good faith I will make every greater mistakes, that I will cease to be trustworthy and therefore lose the right to do what I do" ([Havel, 2002](#), p. 4).

Self-described 'realists' will dismiss the idea of better leadership as muddle-headed. Some will see in it some global conspiracy or another. Prospective leaders will profess sympathy but say that they do not have the time to improve themselves further. And those least qualified to lead will pay no attention at all. But it is not up to any of them to prescribe for us. We are now citizens of the Earth joined in a common enterprise with many variations. We have every right to insist that those who purport to lead us be worthy of the task. Imagine such a time!

Imagine a time, not far off, when we might all be onboard a train heading north!

1. The title comes from Peter Montague. [Environment and Health Weekly, #570 \(October 30, 1997\)](#).

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