

BEHIND THE TIMES
By MICHAEL BURGESS

I'm talking to a friend the other day and he mentions a tribe of savages he read about who have, for all intents and purposes, a single social taboo. For them, the only sin is to be selfish. This reminded me of the anthropologist who, after carefully considering the evidence, suggested that the social cohesion that grows from family and clan, binding people together with ties of mutual affection and common intent, tends to break down when the population gets bigger than five thousand. This made us both wonder if large scale civilization is an activity humans are capable of managing, or, perhaps more to the point, if the civilization we've come up with qualifies as a truly human activity.

We'll never get anywhere sugar coating things. For anyone who's not filthy rich or taking more Prozac than they should, these aren't the best of times. The world is, in plain terms, going to hell in a hand basket. The world has, honest historians will admit, always been going to hell in one sort of basket or another. Many of them suspect that, during peak episodes of unpleasantness, wheelbarrows and oxcarts must have been used, hopefully more efficiently than SUVs.

If we look matters squarely in the eye, our history as a species has been, with few interruptions, an embarrassing pageant of nastiness, cunning and greed punctuated by plague, famine and the occasional savage war. Those few shining moments when decency and compassion poked their heads up seem, in retrospect, like cruel teasing, only adding to the pain and sadness. Not a pretty picture, but there it is. Behind the flashing lights and tambourines, the cavalcade of civilization mostly boils down to someone beating someone else up and taking their stuff. We hoped things would get better if we elected attorneys to lead us. So far, even this hasn't panned out.

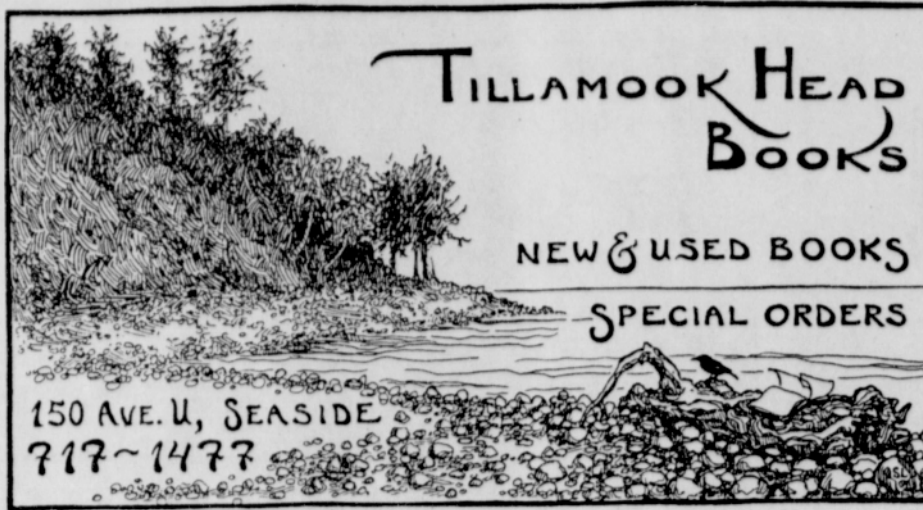
Which isn't to say there hasn't been progress. No one doubts we've come a long way, it's just that the more thoughtful among us are questioning the way we've come. Poised on the slippery edge of a new millennium, we wonder if, as primitives would ask themselves, our path has any heart. To the simple mind, if a path has no heart, it's not a good path and no one in their right mind would follow it. The notion of heart leads to the real question: what does it mean to be human? Or, in anthropological terms, what is the behavioral counterpart to the opposable thumb?

As luck would have it, the answer may not be as complex as it seems. Echoing on a broader scale the taboo against selfishness, every major world faith (belief systems humans derive from and project onto the reality they experience) offers one common piece of all purpose advice: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Regardless of the circumstance, do only this and the winds of the universe will be at your back. That's it. Even for a lawyer, this is not rocket philosophy. What some of us call the golden rule is also the path pointed out by the principle of karma, which differs from fate by disavowing the notion of 'victim'. The rule has endured because it's good advice, it's good advice because it always works and it always works because it's the way the universe works. What we sow, we reap. Garbage out, garbage in. What else would a reasonable person expect? Selfishness breeds want, love breeds love. What we do every moment shapes the world we experience, determines our future and defines us as humans. In savage terms, doing unto others is a path with heart.

If recent events are any indication, this is not the spirit that drives compassionate conservatism. With the anointing He Who Wasn't Elected as president, this country (and with it, by default, the path of human civilization) took a nasty turn. The turn has little to do with political parties or, sadly, even with politics. It has to do with human values and their place, if any, in the business plan of global corporate capitalism: the newest version of a very old world order. The sitting president, his squatting prime minister and the czars of whatnot are, in all fairness, a pitiless cabal of greedy toads the likes of which the world has never seen. Their only belief is in power, their only loyalty is to profit. History would forgive us for marching on the castle with torches and pitchforks.

There is, of course, a bright side: the ruling class has at last abandoned all pretense. The gloves are off, almost everything isn't enough and they're coming for the rest. This is much, much more than more of the same. It's the end game, the feeding frenzy. They sense weakness and smell blood. No longer just the power behind the throne, the folks who once had to shell out good money to buy the government now are the government. The emperor, and the empire, have never been more naked, more ugly or more real. There's an old story, Persian I think, about a young seeker of wisdom and truth. His search takes him finally to the edge of the world where he finds a monstrous, slaving beast devouring everything in sight. When he asks the beast why he's doing this, the beast replies: "Because one day it will all be gone."

To the simple mind, this is not a path with heart and, all over the planet, peasant philosophers are beginning to wonder if a civilization based on greed, whose only taboo is compassion, can properly be called human.



A HISTORY
By Karen Barna

I guess my earliest recollection of a childhood interrupted is from age five. I lived in Detroit, right on the edge of the city proper. It was the early '70s, not too long after the race riots. The world was at an economic crossroads. My father (and the rest of his generation) could no longer assume that he would do as well as his father merely by working hard. Those who tried to get by without a college education or, at least, a skilled trade, were getting left behind. No longer could a man support his family single-handedly. More and more mothers were forced to abandon the nest in order to make ends meet. And hot on the trail of this modern phenomenon came the Oil Crisis and the resultant layoffs in the automobile industry. My father, a young executive at Ford Motor Company, was among tens of thousands to lose his job. For awhile, he got by. He managed a gas station until he was shot at during a robbery, which started a downward spiral of blue collar positions.

My mother was a bookkeeper and did taxes and so forth to earn extra money. She had creative talents that served the family as well. She was Martha Stewart before Martha was, decorating Christmas trees at lawn and garden stores for cash. Some of my fondest memories are of accompanying her to a shop in Hazel Park, across from the racetrack. She would work and my brother and I had free rein to roam the place. We'd play hide and seek among the piles of peat moss bags. Climb on the roof. Steal flower bulbs from the bins. To this day, my mother has a bed of tulips that owe their existence to a particular set of sticky fingers. If things got really tedious, I was permitted to cross the street and visit the horse racing track. Mother did an attorney's books by day, and he owned a couple of Thoroughbreds. I had direct entrée to the barns. What a wonder it was to cross the highway and, within five minutes, find myself enveloped by the richness of horse life. Sweet hay. Pungent manure. Gentle, nickering mares and fidgety stallions. They were sights and sounds and smells that are with me to this day.

At that point we were doing OK. My older brother was thirteen. My younger was four. My parents were young and loved each other fiercely. We lived in a three bedroom house, complete with fence and dog. Hell, there was even a swimming pool in the back yard. We were the urban Joneses! Except for one tiny detail. We were white.

Race relations were bad all over the country, but the situation was really polarized in the late '60s and early '70s. Influenced, I believe, by the dipping economy and continuing disenfranchisement of uneducated and unemployed blacks. Little by little, our neighborhood gave way to white flight. As the inner city crumbled economically, those who could afford to move to the fringes did so without delay. My friend Matthew and his family were one of the first to go. They were one house up and across the street, and I fractured my spine falling out of a tree in their backyard (but completely recovered). The Kowalczyks divorced and thus my best friend, Michelle, went next. They were three houses up on the same side of the street, and my other great childhood accident occurred in their backyard.

The Kowalczyks had a fabulous swing set - it must have been fifteen feet high with thick iron chains and heavy wooden seats. It bestowed an old-fashioned head rush. We would swing from dawn until dusk, dipping back so our hair brushed the dirt and butterflies leaped in our bellies. One day, in an attempt to escape the heavysset, cheek-pinching relatives converging on our home to celebrate my grandparent's anniversary, I wandered over to Michelle's. She wasn't home, so I tried swinging by myself. Not too much fun, if I recall correctly. It was much more exciting to jump off the swing. I'm sure there was a distance record. I'm equally sure I was of a mind to break it. The trick was to let go of the chains at the swing's apex and let momentum and gravity carry you to newfound glory. My flight was long and graceful and ended abruptly at the mid-point of the Kowalczyks' mighty Oak tree. The anniversary party was quickly traded for the emergency room and I spent the summer up to my shoulder in plaster. I was a legend.

The biggest loss of the block, however, was when Grandma and Grandpa Trammush abandoned Archdale Street for the greener pastures of suburban life. They weren't my grandparents. They weren't anybody's grandparents at that point. But we loved them as if they were. I don't remember what Grandpa did for a living - something to do with the auto industry, I'm certain. But Grandma, she was another story. Their basement was filled with confections of all shapes and sizes. Her take from her bakery-on-the-side must have easily equaled Grandpa's union auto pay! Wedding cakes, rice paper decorations, sugar eggs with Easter scenes inside and beads of frosting at the opening and along the seams. But the very best part of the whole operation was the cake scrapings. Every time she made a tiered cake, no matter the occasion, the tops had to be leveled off so that they would evenly stack. Grandma would show up on our doorstep with cake pans full of scrapings. Rich chocolate. Buttery yellowcake. Fluffy angel food. I would have laid across all three lanes of the Southfield Freeway for her and her cake scrapings, if only I stretched that far.

Things seemed to change irrevocably when Grandma and Grandpa Trammush left. I didn't know why. I was five years old. I was not aware of racism or race tensions or race anything, and I certainly didn't dislike black people. Our next-door neighbors were lovely people. They smiled and laughed and loved their children like my parents loved me and my brothers. They did, however, eat from a slightly different menu than we. I tried grits and black-eyed peas and took countless other culinary adventures whenever I visited. I thought nothing of it. But there was something going on... Something so tangible it could suck the air from your lungs at a moment's notice. I had no idea what. If my parents discussed race relations or voiced disparaging remarks against blacks, they did so out of my earshot. I was only aware of people walking around like cats on hot coals.

I started kindergarten about the same time my mom went to work full time, and Mrs. Woolned was our babysitter. Mr. Woolned was a police officer, which made the family a particular source of neighborhood derision. For awhile I was subject to beatings by a group of children on the way home from school. Looking back, I'm not sure whether they were related to my parent's choice in caregivers or based

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From The Lower Left Corner
Victoria Stoppiello

It takes more than a pretty beach

Matt Winters editorialized recently about Cannon Beach being named one of the nation's top ten beaches. He said Cannon Beach made good choices and pointed out that "other nearby locales are at least equally well-endowed, yet miss the mark in terms of recognition or the hard-to-define ability to delight. Pacific County's Cape Disappointment and North Head, for example, and much of the Columbia estuary shoreline are at least as pretty as Cannon Beach but haven't yet caught on as money magnets."

Matt didn't mention other factors in Cannon Beach's success: Back in the 70's beauty and cheap rents attracted artists, who fixed up the place, and the town long ago engaged in activities that many people in our area feel are anathema—and antithetical to their idea of making a buck. In fact, Cannon Beach has made choices that mitigate against making a fast buck in favor of slowly expanding wealth.

When Oregon's land-mark land use planning law went into effect back in 1975, instead of balking or trying to opt out, Cannon Beach government saw the required comprehensive plan (adopted in 1979) as an opportunity to create not only a vision for their community but real tools to manifest that vision. Cannon Beach also commits the crime, in some free enterprise advocates eyes, of heavily regulating commercial development and residential private property. In Cannon Beach, when you build a commercial building or multi-family housing, you have to go through a design review process. The intent is to focus on the quality of the pedestrian experience instead of vehicles. Not everyone likes the aesthetic that results (some call it Washington Square under barn wood), but the process results in an aesthetic consistent enough to be recognizable and memorable.

Cannon Beach also has regulations that some of my neighbors would find down right deplorable. The first one that comes to mind is tree protection. You can't cut down a tree over six inches in diameter at "breast height" unless you have a permit. The criteria for permits include disease, hazard, blocking sun from a solar device, or being in the building envelope for new construction. Furthermore, if it's a "vacant" lot, you can't cut anything until you have a building permit—none of this clear-cutting a residential lot, sticking a new "for sale" sign on it, and leaving it for the scotch broom to take over. The idea is to get people to think about trees as a community asset, and to attempt to save trees.

Another regulation has to do with view protection. Cannon Beach uses "oceanfront averaging," meaning you can place your new building only the average setback of your neighbors 100 feet north and south of you. This prevents a new monster house, built closer to the water, from blocking the view from older homes set further back. Residential building height is limited to 24 feet all over town, except when you have a roof pitch 5/12 or greater, where the maximum is 28 feet, but still an average of 24 feet from the existing grade.

The beach itself is fought over but the public always wins—at least so far. Oregon's beach laws prevent developers from denying beach access, and platted streets, whether paved or not, must remain open for pedestrian access to the water. This means everyone in town has easy access to the beach.

Another Oregon law prohibits hardening of the dunes and bluffs along the oceanfront. Yes, you'll see a few old gunite-coated areas, but even rip-rap is heavily discouraged if not outright banned. Oregon law recognizes that rip-rap and concrete may save one, but create more erosion for the folks next door. In this case, government regulation protects property values. Cannon Beach has gone beyond state government's concern about the environment. The city has one of the first wetland tertiary treatment sewage facilities on the West Coast—making its sewage treatment site, only blocks from the commercial core, a destination for bird-watchers and other wildlife lovers. Citizens also developed a model recycling facility to reduce the amount of solid waste, realizing no more landfills would be sited in Clatsop County. Concerned about plans for off-shore oil drilling, Cannon Beach citizens decided to take action to reduce their community's need for fossil fuels and implemented a free shuttle service that ferries people, visitors and residents alike, from one end to the other of the two-mile long town. This reduced parking problems too.

Cannon Beach may have a gorgeous beach, but the community has turned Haystack Rock into more than a mere photo op. It's become a symbol of a town with a strong identity tied to beauty and environmental sensitivity—while making a lot of money at the same time. We could do the same here, and next time, I'll give you a few ideas about Ilwaco.

Victoria Stoppiello is a free-lance writer from Ilwaco, at the lower left corner of Washington state.

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