

Mo' Stuff

Yep, it is true your beloved editor has suddenly lost all fear of flying. And with the help of Ms. Angie in her role as travel agent, I will be boarding a plane for Copenhagen Oct. 24th, armed with valium, nicotine patches and enough gin to keep me quiet enough to not scare the other passengers. I will be staying in Amsterdam for a few days to get over jet lag and culture shock, ("You can smoke that right here at the bar?") and then on to Barcelona and eventually to Paris. (Fair warning, Mr. Whitman, I will be showing up on the doorstep of Shakespeare & Co. before you know it.) No, at this writing, I don't have either the money or a passport, and I sure don't have the Platinum VISA card I have been hinting at for months. But, none the less, I'm off. I'm still also looking for someone to sub-let the hideout. Five hundred a month for the winter, two bedrooms, two baths, a couple blocks from the ocean. No pets, but smoking is allowed. What?

The paper will continue under the gentle hands of Ms. Angie and Sally, and I will still be ranting on a regular basis, so don't worry.

Okay, if you are absolutely broke and have no prospects of getting better off soon, please stop reading now.

The rest of you folks I would like to encourage you to do something silly; send me money. It doesn't matter to me why, you could send me money because you don't like me and want me to leave, not just this town, but this state and this country. Works for me. You could send me money because the paper has made you laugh or think, and you liked that. You could send me money because everyone else who is asking you for money deserves it more than I do, and you don't care. It really doesn't matter. I will be leaving anyway. I can't tell you how much I will miss my beautiful home by the sea, but I will be leaving anyway. I might be back, I don't really know. But if you want to be really silly, like I'm being, send me money!

Peace,

billy

"Let us have but one end in view, the welfare of humanity; and let us put aside all selfishness in consideration of language, nationality or religion."
John Comenius

Mary Elizabeth Anderson, one of the sweetest women I ever hope to know, lost her battle with lung cancer September 28th.

Mary was my neighbor for three years; I fed her cat when she traveled. She excelled in tolerance and generosity, had a sweet nickname, and a thoughtful nature. She offered plant starts and cookies, and abundant friendship.

For some recent time Mary had been writing a column for the Cannon Beach Gazette, and it is a measure of her heart's greatness that in her last few days, she focussed in her writing on the tragic recent events in America, the huge importance of human compassion, of finding common ground, and of understanding others.

In the midst of her own struggle for life, Mary devoted most of her thoughts to the struggles of humanity, and ends her final column with these words: "... Let's share the experience of asking questions, knowing there may be no easy answers."

Her absence leaves a void.



Sally Lackoff

Behind the Times
Michael Burgess

In a past life, while preparing thirty wildly disinterested high school students for a history exam the state insisted that I give them, I was presented with an interesting challenge. The examination would cover western history from the rise of Greek civilization through the Second World War. The challenge, aside from pretending it was possible even to write such an examination, was to find a unifying theme for twenty-five centuries of large scale human activity. Without some common thread to connect them to the past, these apprentice humans' connection to the present would remain an unapproachable mystery. I wanted them to understand what had happened, how we'd come to be where and who and what we are. They, of course, needed to pass the test.

I was in those days a budding young educator and took very seriously my responsibility to subvert any young mind I could get my hands on. It was the early seventies. The social and political revolution that came inches from ripping America limb from limb had quietly mutated into ad copy for Buick commercials. It was my considered professional opinion that the children of the middle class needed all the subversion they could get. Every educator has an angle. That was mine.

History has been called a river of events flowing into an ocean of legends, lies and indifference. It is, always and forever, what we make of it: the raw data of what happens is, as they say in the entertainment business, a story in need of a hook. The unifying theme I gave my young innocents was that the rise of western civilization is most honestly seen as a relentless succession of robberies: most of them well organized and all of them heavily armed. From this perspective, humanity's trials and travails, its agonies and triumphs, its laughter and its tears have all flowed from a single nasty fault line in our collective psyche: our tendency to want what we don't have and to take what doesn't belong to us.

The wealth of nations is, in simplest terms, the current score in an endless blood bath of greed and violence. Owing to the rules of play, and the uneven topography of the playing field, whatever laurels there might be often wind up on the wrong heads; and the strong, who aren't always more virtuous than the weak, end up with all the stuff. They also get to write the history books: a fact which explains why there are so few accounts of fox hunts written by a fox. Their little student eyes widened. They saw, they understood and, for the record, every one of them passed the test. This is, a quarter century later, more than can be said for whatever wizard it is who lives behind the curtain.

Someone, it doesn't matter who, once offered the idea that all ownership is theft. The earth did not, after all, come with a deed; nor did the birds of the air, the beasts of the fields, the fields themselves or the oil bearing strata beneath them. The earth, it can reasonably be argued, belongs to everyone and what belongs to everyone can belong to no one. Humans are, of course, territorial animals, as justified as howler monkeys to shriek from the treetops when someone invades their berry patch. There remains a difference, some would say a deep conceptual chasm, between defending one's territory and parceling it into real estate. In many societies, not all of them extinct and none more savage than our own, the notion of buying and selling bits of the earth is a craziness unworthy of anything but laughter.

The issue of possession, and its consequences, run deep. A researcher recently found that human populations have varied in relation to the status of women in the society. In groups that reserved for women the status of domestic slaves and breeding stock, population growth exceeded the territory's capacity to sustain it. In groups in which women were considered every bit as human as men, population remained in balance. The pattern, the researcher noted, still plays out in the world around us. When women are confused with something one can own, the cellular metabolism of human society becomes cancerous. Who among the thoughtful would be surprised?

Given the idea of ownership, the idiot notion of dominion is as predictable as the progress of an untreated psychosis. The myth of possession leads to the myth of control. The briefest review of the behavioral outcome would, to a mental health professional, indicate a patient crying out for intervention. What greater insanity than to imagine that, even if dominion over nature were possible, humans would be the natural choice to wield it. (My personal vote would go to otters.) What unbridled lunacy to think that, because we have a large, and largely unused brain, we know more about nature than nature.

An old friend, who spends enough time in the forest near his home on the Oregon coast to claim more "ownership" than the timber company clear cutting it with a vengeance bordering on hysteria, is looking hard to find a bright side. He believes, with great sadness and sincerity, that anything that can properly be called a rain forest will be lost in our lifetime. The forest is not a collection of trees and plants; it's a free form laboratory conducting critical basic research in the perfection of life forms, one of which is us. Our dominion boils down to turning the old growth DNA of evolution into two-by-fours, bark dust and tree farms which are, to a forest,

what sofa-sized paintings are to art. We must remind ourselves, my friend reminds us, there are things worth dying to prevent.

The notion of ownership runs deep: deeper than rainforests and wetlands, deeper than the condo in Cabo, deeper than the family assault vehicle, deeper even than the children we import from third world countries to vacuum carpets in Brentwood. (As anyone with too much money will tell you, nothing in life quite compares to owning another human.) Rich or poor, slave or master, a final question faces all of us: who, or what, am I? When I say I, what is it exactly I mean? What do we see when we look in the mirror; or, more importantly, when we turn out the light? What is it, truly and finally, that's ours? Until we know this, we can't know our place in the unfolding universe; and, if we don't know that, whatever else we know scarcely matters.

If we possess anything that can't be taken from us by a slump in the market, a boss who doesn't appreciate us, or a lover who's had enough, it must be who and what we are. Our dearest possession is the idea of a self: a privileged observer who, through thick and thin, is always there: looking through our eyes, fondling our sensory circuits and trying, often desperately and to no avail, to understand what's going on. Should the world turn on us and take away our toys and trinkets, we still will have our selves. If we can be certain of anything, we can be certain of that. We can also be certain it's not what we don't know that hurts us; it's what we think we know but don't.

Siddhartha, the man who became Buddha, had an interesting take on the notion of self. Confronting the challenge of putting an end to human suffering, the hook he gave us for the history of human experience was that unhappiness has its roots in attachment: in clinging to imagined permanence in a world whose only constant is change. This is as close as Buddhism comes to original sin. We divide the world revealed to us by our senses into two parts: the self and the not-self. Disengaging from the seductive smoke and mirrors of the not-self is challenge enough; disengaging from the intimate, incestuous embrace of the self is the end game of all control. Here, loosely paraphrased, are Siddhartha's thoughts.

Whatever the Self is, it cannot be our body because our body is impermanent and dies. Whatever the Self is, it cannot be our feelings because our feelings are in constant flux: what we feel now we did not feel yesterday and may not feel tomorrow. Whatever the Self is, it cannot be our thoughts because our thoughts rise and fall like leaves in the wind and change radically from moment to moment. Whatever the Self is, it cannot be our soul because our soul is pure becoming: the product of our actions. Siddhartha concluded that, instead of a Self, there exists only a bundle of Not-Selves clamoring for attention. His advice, in simplest terms, was to ignore them and get on with our search for happiness: the swiftest horse that bears us to enlightenment.

But we were speaking of history and the rising and falling of civilizations. All politics is personal. On the most fundamental level we can imagine, our sense of self, we are all of us the idle rich: possessed by our possessions and owned by the act of owning. It's helpful sometimes, when considering the unfolding and unraveling of life around us, to consider the nature of the "real" world. Aside from music and poetry, the best description of things as they are is provided by physical theory; or, as it was called when ordinary people were encouraged to think, natural philosophy. Physical theory, it's important to remember, isn't the least bit theoretical. A theory may change over time, or be supplanted by a more powerful theory, but its generalized principles are grounded firmly in observation. In order to be successful, a theory must explain what we see. This is its reason for being.

The most successful theory in the history of human thought is quantum mechanics. Nothing, not even general relativity, comes close to quantum theory's ability to explain the vast scope of what we can see, from the birth of light to the death of stars. As far as quantum theory can see, there are no nouns in the universe. There are only verbs. There are no products in the universe, there is only ceaseless process; no things, only events; no endings, only beginnings; no being, only becoming: a rising and falling of phenomena that, not so oddly, mirrors the rising and falling of mind. Rather than a great machine, the creation more closely resembles a great thought.

And thoughts, like cats and rain forests and people, can never be owned. Like all of life, they can only be experienced.

STOPPIELLO
Architecture
& EcoDesign

310 Lake Street
PO Box 72
Ilwaco, WA 98624
astoparc@pacifier.com

ANTHONY STOPPIELLO, Architect

360.642.4256

Icefire
GLASSWORKS

⊖ ⊕ ⊙

JIM KINGWELL

POST OFFICE BOX 382
CANNON BEACH, OR 97110
PHONE 503.436.2359

UPPER LEFT EDGE

Editor, Publisher, Janitor:
the Beloved Reverend Billy Lloyd Huits
Graphics Editor, Proofing, Layout:
Sally Lackoff
Uncle Mike, Blame it on the Stars,
Behind the Times: Michael Burgess
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"The liberty of a democracy is not safe if the people tolerate the growth of private power to a point where it becomes stronger than their democratic State itself. That, in its essence, is Fascism: Ownership of government by an individual, by a group or by any controlling private power." -FDR

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Seaside: Buck's Book Barn, Universal Video, & Cafe Espresso

Portland: Artichoke Music, Laughing Horse Bookstore, Act III, Barnes & Noble, Belmonts Inn, Bibliot Art Gallery, Bijou Cafe, Borders, Bridgeport Brew Pub, Capt'n Beans (two locations), Center for the Healing Light, Coffee People (three locations), Common Grounds Coffee, East Avenue Tavern, Food Front, Goose Hollow Inn, Hot Lips Pizza, Java Bay Cafe, Key Largo, La Patisserie, Lewis & Clark College, Locals Only, Marco's Pizza, Marylhurst College, Mt. Hood C.C., Music Millennium, Nature's (two locations), NW Natural Gas, OHSU Medical School, Old Wines Tales, Ozone Records, Papa Haydn, PCC (four locations), PSU (two locations), Reed College, Third Eye, Multnomah Central Library, and most branches & the YWCA.

Ashland: Garo's Java House, The Black Sheep, Blue Mt. Cafe, & Rogue River Brewery

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