

Reflections in the flames

Contributed by Tom Peifer
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Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed.

Francis Bacon

I watched in awe during October of 2004 as a great part of my native Southern California was consumed in flames. From the relative safety of Costa Rica in the rainy season, I followed closely as 2 of my children and their mom evacuated the San Diego suburb of Tierra Santa where, fortunately, less than a dozen homes were lost. Thousands of other families were not so lucky. Examples of the finger-pointing and political posturing to come were immediately forwarded by friends throughout the region.

As one observer put it, Southern California will continue to burn until its inhabitants learn to live "within the dictates of the region's ecology." Better late than never, one might argue, bearing in mind the massive diversion of water and other resources which have fueled the growth of the virtual megalopolis stretching from Point Conception to the Mexican border.

Somehow, the Native American inhabitants of the region, numbering at best in the tens of thousands, figured out how to live humbly and sustainably off the bounty of the land and sea. They didn't even have to resort to the back breaking chores of agriculture, not to mention the frenzied stress, commuting and Zanex of the present day suburban culture.

My neighbors here in Guanacaste, a poor agricultural province in northwestern Costa Rica are simple folk. Their ancestors, the Chorotegas, practiced some agriculture, but apparently managed to live at relative peace with the environment. Even the poorest of them now watch televisión and have great respect and admiration for their powerful and affluent neighbor to the north. In fact the Alliance for Progress, under Kennedy, brought electricity to Guanacaste. They ask me, "How can these fires happen in the greatest country in the world?" I tell them that chaparral burns differently from the forests here, where litter fires are a common occurrence in the dry season. I try to explain the alien concept of atmospheric pressure differences which cause the hot dry winds. They go away--either enlightened or more confused--to tend to their corn crops or check on their grazing cattle.

There is just no easy way for me to explain to them my gut feeling, that the underlying reason for the fires in California is more than just a mix of thermodynamics and meteorology.

California in particular, and the United States as a whole, is a prime example of the original sin of mankind—hubris, pride. We think that we're the center of creation, instead of a somewhat special product of universal forces at work. More focused on the "fun in the sun" life style and important career decisions, Californians have yet to learn to coexist with the explosive mix of chaparral and Santa Ana winds. (Ironically, as high school students in Santa Ana, we were forced to see graphic films of traffic accidents-- to drive home the fatal consequences of screwing up behind the wheel.) Nonetheless, Americans continue to enjoy life in the fast lane of consumerism, convinced you can have an expanding economy with diminishing resources. We still haven't learned the rules of the road.

After living a dirt poor decade of farming and riding a bike on dirt roads in the tropical heat, I visited my native state in April and May of this year. The parade of SUV's, Humvees and fuller size 4 by 4's barrelling along on 6 lane freeways left no doubt in my mind as to the real motives behind the US invasion of Iraq. Many of my friends were ashamed of the current administration and some protested its policies. To me it seemed only logical that a country of gasoholics would end up ruled by an "oily-golopoly," continuing a relentless pursuit of petroleum fueled prosperity--heedless of the consequences.

As I write, a troop of Howler monkeys swings gracefully through the forest on its way to snack on a few papaya leaves. Elegantly adapted to life in the treetops, these distant relatives of ours live in harmony with the paradise which God bestowed upon them. Not so their upright cousins--homo sapiens--who apparently came down out of the trees, took stock of the situation, and began the task of rearranging nature more to our liking. From the fires set by early hunters to massive deforestation for agriculture and settlement, mankind has been hell bent on showing mother nature just who runs the show. Reweaving DNA, the strands of life itself, and sucking out the earth to belch it into the sky are just the latest chapters in the long epic of pride at work.

It is interesting to note that indigenous cultures worldwide developed different myths warning of the disasters to be incurred by transgression against nature. These myths have been swept away first by liturgically based religions as mere witchcraft and more recently by economics, the de facto global religion. Its not a lack of information. We know that the planet earth is the only habitable real estate among the billions of sterile rocks in the known universe. But we lack the common sense to proceed with respect and even reverence in the natural realm, to not let our priceless natural equity go up in smoke.

Everyone watched helpless as a sizeable chunk of net worth spiraled into the sky last October. As predicted by folk myths, mother nature is capable of spanking her favored child when it misbehaves. I'm not evoking hell-fire and

brimstone, the retribution of a judgemental Father in the sky, simply the consequences of how we choose to live on earth.

Globally, the US is still setting the trends. Satellite broadcasts are beaming in—and creating the demand for--the affluence, the fun and games of the American way of life. What they fail to show are the consequences. The fires provided at best a glimpse of what happens when we overlook nature's bottom line.

According to reports, parts of San Diego County now look like ground zero at Hiroshima. The long term results of environmental malfeasance at the planetary level invite a day of reckoning that will make the recent fires in California look like child's play. Mankind may one day find itself longing for the lazy life up in the trees. The real original sin is not eating the wrong apple. It's the hubris, the egocentric pride, of trying to re-engineer the tree of life.

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