

## ● Taking it Personally

Civil rights, human rights, environmental rights. . . freedom of, freedom to, freedom from. . . . Freedom of speech. Freedom of association. The fundamental right (as Justice Brandeis called it) to be left alone (cf. Isaiah Berlin on *negative liberty*: “the maximum degree of non-interference compatible with the minimum demands of a social life”). The rights and obligations of citizenship. The tensions (between public and private; local, national and international; individual and societal) intrinsic to government, especially maybe to a democratic republic, a body politic engaged in conversations with itself.

It’s not surprising that the environmental movement in the US started and spread in conjunction with the civil rights, peace, women’s and LGBTQ movements, nor that they all rose up in the reactionary repressive pressure cooker of the Cold War insecurity state. The photograph of earth from the moon printed on the cover of *The Whole Earth Catalog* following the 1969 moonshot may be the signature icon of the era—the new vision of Spaceship Earth as Buckminster Fuller called it, putting in vividly pictorial terms the need to “think globally” (as David Brower put it), that is, to think (w)holistically, ecologically about the real world, our real estate.

My own trajectory isn’t untypical: teenage loneliness and rebellion coming of age in the early civil rights movement; twenties restlessness and soul-searching caught up in the anti-war movement; thirties and forties deliberately confronting the forces of environmental destruction, guided by an increasingly complex and therefore increasingly nuanced understanding of the main ecological principle (summed up by John Muir as everything “hitched up to everything else”); fifties focusing on what the previous years had shown to be a field where I might be of most use; sixties sliding into retirement, trying to see and understand the “long strange trip it’s been.”

From local actions (e.g., a rally to raise money for the sit-ins in the South; helping organize the first sit-in in my home town, Toledo, Ohio, to integrate a neighborhood roller rink); to actions targeting state and federal policies (demonstrations, marches, lobbying, drafting laws and regulations, etc.); to media-aware actions geared toward effecting meaningful change at local to global levels (e.g., conferences and campaigns, lobbying, at-the-table participation in changing international policies and practices). From teenage rallies to UN treaty-making, with multiple stops in between. And always trying to set it down in clear writing: description, explanation, argument; in fact, I seldom trusted my ad lib skills enough to give extemporaneous talks.

Altruisms and kindred idealisms likely animate any sustained public endeavor, but my years of activism were founded on an urgent sense of self-defense (self-interest, if you will). Saving the world wasn’t where it was at. I never had much use for do-gooders and busybodies in general, or found them to be of much use *in situ*; usually found that they smacked too much of *holier-than-thou* with a tendency to turn the other cheek. For years I kept a button on display at home which nicely ridiculed the hero-myth that was more in vogue than ever, and government-approved, after 9-11: “If I don’t save the universe who will?”

On the other hand, besides responding to instinct and the need to protect self and family in the face of clear and present danger, many people joined the environmental movement not only from the promptings of survival instinct and sense of adherence to the environmental *ethos*, but from empathy with the natural world, personal commitment to participation in protection of the global commons, the commonwealth, the endangered support system of Mother Earth.

Faced with a seemingly unstoppable cascade of environmental mayhem (Lake Erie fish kills, the disappearance of eagles and songbirds, the Cuyahoga River on fire, smog, Love Canal, the

clearcutting and ripoff of forests, the bulldozing of wetlands, the ecocide in Vietnam, Seveso, Bhopal, Chernobyl. . . ), along with millions of other people I went into survival mode, withdrew, looking for a safe haven, for means to stave off the menace, to bring it to heel, confine it, understand its nature in order to know where to counter it, to do whatever it took to end it.

The second half of the Cold War/Lonely Crowd era when American individualism often appeared in the guise of alienation, delinquency a common behavior in all age groups throughout the nation. Emerson's Self-Reliance after the Bomb and its preparatory century.

Feeling at odds with what I thought of as most cultural norms of the day, my sense of self embattled, withdrawal seemed the best choice. In my teens, one of my first pieces of writing to win a prize was an essay expressing the maddening effects of light and noise pollution. In my twenties, I left family, career and lifestyle, eventually leaving urban habitats behind as far as feasible, to live in the mountains and uplands of the west, northwest and southwest. In 1971, I settled onto forty acres of high semidesert grassland in southeast Arizona, ten miles from the US-Mexico border.

After a time more or less hiding out with a chip on my shoulder, I began to see individualism itself as a large part of the problem. While it did in a sense afford a sort of self-protection, it was also oppressive, threatening, the very mentality behind king-of-the-mountain industrialization and finance. I had a growing awareness that I needed to temper such hallowed traditions (manifested all too plainly in client-state diplomacy, business-as-usual and macho attitude) with equally-venerable pro-social traditions of nurturing and community. Citizenship as brotherhood.

Individualism as it had come to be by mid-20<sup>th</sup> C generates its contrary: the ego/subject/I is *ipso facto* in relation to an Other, a kind of mirror-self. The problem is dialectical. The sometimes screaming Me-Me's inevitably have to come to terms (or grips) with the Me-Its (and often do so by finding some condolence or escape from isolation, some reconfigured sense of identity in the dissociative Us-Them of social reality with all its obvious potential for unpleasantness).

One of the turning points in my retreat was the recognition (Whitmanic, I thought at the time) that the other I was confronting looked a lot like me, that I and the dominant culture (and associated political regime) were in fact offspring of the same leatherstocking yankee-doodle incubator. No escaping it. We the people singing a song of myself. "Figuring out the enemy" meant, to an unnerving degree, understanding myself. Identity politics with a vengeance.

Well aware that such ruminations smacked of psychobabble, instead of taking to the couch (not being inclined toward psychoanalytic theory), I set out to see how what I had in common with my mirror-society could be used not so much against It/Them as to find common goals and ways to achieve them. Similarly, I began to see that as a community of activists, as a movement, we couldn't reasonably, or ethically, seek to educate the public or "shift the paradigm" until we recognized our immersion, participation, even collusion, our *place* in it. As Wendell Berry wrote, "If we are members of a society, we participate, willy-nilly, in its evils." Not to recognize this is not only to lose, as he says, "the vision of community," but to enable those evils. Dropping out came to seem a copping out; engagement the order of the day.

And though I admit to having felt some pride in my work when I got letters (and, later, emails) from activists in places I had never been, like one from an herbicide activist in Chino, California, congratulating me for, among other things, showing "how much a single individual can accomplish," I was also increasingly aware of how much an individual acting alone can't do.

By April 1970, the date of the first Earth Day, it was widely acknowledged that the extent of environmental problems required political, not just personal and bakesale-level action on

national and international, not just local, state and regional fronts. Conceived and engineered largely by people of my age-group, children brought up in the shadow of the mushroom cloud with our ingrained understanding of the need for *restraint* (the need to rein in our drives and desires across the board, to check our greed, our runaway technology, our out-of-date scarcity economics king-of-the-mountain games); given impetus by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and political expression in the *Wilderness Act* of 1964 and *National Environmental Policy Act* (NEPA, signed into law on 1 January 1970); that first Earth Day can be seen as a marker for the resurgence and realignment of the coalition-building that had characterized the civil rights, anti-war and youth movements of the 60s.

Many of the same groups that came together for social and political action then, found it relatively easy and advantageous to include environmental issues in their agendas, especially insofar as environment came to be seen as the basic context, and ecological degradation as a fundamental threat for all movements. The 70s through 80s saw an unprecedented rise and effective mobilization of networks and coalitions in many parts of civil society, few or none more prevalent or effective than those among conservationist, naturalist and environmentalist groups, manifesting anew the associational proclivity in American culture noted a century-and-a-half earlier by Tocqueville.

While from where I stood, it looked like most groups in these new alliances were of what traditionally was called left or left-liberal persuasion, the all-inclusive nature of the movement drew support from both sides of that cultural-political divide. Some of the strongest and most effective Congressional advocates for environmental protection were Republicans, some of the most dangerous were washed-in-the-blood Democrats. And as, in the 70s and 80s both the dominant parties in the US increasingly were seen to be subsets of an overarching Business or War Party, with both sides dedicated to endless (though periodically interrupted) technology-driven, environmentally-destructive economic growth, the movement tended to develop beyond the usual two-party structure.

In the 90s, growing recognition of the overlap of social justice and environmental justice for minority groups; the common interests of labor and community organizations in the safety of workplace and public environments; the widespread awareness of the ecological effects of war (from resource exploitation to chemical, explosive and radiological devastation of land, air, water and food)—all led to environmental groups frequently becoming allied with social justice, health, labor and other public sector advocacy groups to form broad-based networks, alliances that became ever stronger as the groups found themselves faced with a similarly rapid growth of globalization, so-called free trade, and a corresponding proliferation of corporations and high-finance lobbying consortia.

Though many, probably most of us in the US weren't aware of it, the environmental movement was in fact global. First brought to prominence in the 1972 UN "Conference on the Human Environment" (the "Stockholm Conference"), the movement progressed through a powerful series of processes and agreements that have kept it (largely unlike its US counterpart) active and effective on widely diverse fronts. Generally-considered the most significant of these products out of Stockholm, was the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). Brought together at UN request in 1983 and chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland of the Netherlands, the Brundtland Commission included a number of distinguished environmental leaders from around the world, among them William Ruckelshaus (EPA's first administrator and then in that position again a decade later, replacing Reagan's first EPA choice, Anne Gorsuch, after her scandal-driven resignation).

In 1987, the Brundtland Commission issued its first report, *Our Common Future*, which made

clear that *environment* and *sustainable development*, the two principal largely disconnected terms dealt with by the Stockholm Conference, were in fact interdependent and inseparable. Giving large place to concerns with social equity, poverty and indigenous peoples, emphasizing political rather than technical solutions, the report made terms like *pollution prevention*, *precautionary principle*, *polluter pays*, *public participation* and *sustainability* part of the new international vocabulary codified in succeeding UN meetings, processes and treaties, most notably the 1992 Earth Summit and its resultant *Agenda 21* and summary *Rio Declaration*.

The Rio Earth Summit (UNCED, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) was a pivotal event in global environmental protection. With 172 nations participating and 2400 NGOs having consultative status (with 17,000 people attending the parallel Global Forum), the summit issued a number of precedent-setting agreements, including the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Framework Convention on Climate Change, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, and the Commission on Sustainable Development (which latter was tasked with overseeing outcomes of the Summit).

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Terms of engagement as arbitration, conflict resolution, cooperation, working together, democratic process. . . . My writing and talks began to emphasize first person plural rather than singular faced off against second. Politics as civil discourse. Communication, said Kenneth Burke, the basic act of love, the opposite of war. Right about then, NAFTA reared its ugly head. As an environmental NGO based on the US-Mexico border, with connections on both sides of the line, Arizona Toxics Information (ATI, the non-profit organization I started in 1990) was quickly propelled into the high-stakes politics of globalization, international trade and the tangled mess of the ecology-economics pushme-pullyou. For the next ten years I was in the thick of it, promoting the equal protection principles of environmental protection in the international arena, networking with major transnational groups as well as with other small NGOs from countries all over the world, culminating (thanks in large measure to Fran Irwin at World Wildlife Fund) in work on the OECD's "Guidebook for Nations" on how to implement PRTRs, and (more or less synchronously) with the International POPS Elimination Network (IPEN) in crafting the 2001 *Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants*.

Fads, fallacies, urban legends, slogans, buzzwords and the like (jargon, slang, codewords, *patois*, *popular delusions and the madness of crowds* as Mackay called them), tend it's said to infinity, they come and go—in environmental politics as elsewhere. One year this a hot-button, next year that. But linking one with another can give some sense of relations, continuities, some shape to otherwise amorphous cultural perturbations. Connecting dots.

*Public Participation, Right to Know, Environmental Justice, Environmental Protection, Environmental Health, Medical Prudence, Life cycle analysis, Pollution Prevention, Reduce Reuse Recycle, Polluter Pays, Precautionary Principle, Not In My Backyard, Preserve Protect Enjoy, People Not Poisons, Forever Wild, Love Your Mother*—these phrases are of that time, and are of a kind: a string, birds of a feather, terms of art, terms in a grammar of action, in flux, the meaning of each subject to change, implicating the meanings of the others, jointly and severally. This one or that one in fashion at any given time, old ones becoming obsolete, new subjects taken up, new fields brought into focus. . .yet remaining meaningful.

As the discourse continues, linkages between this that and the other are nurtured. Not to put too platonic a spin on it or a biological map of an aristotelian sort, there is an intercourse (not to say incest), a communion, a communication, some likeness linking the headlines and labels and environmental poster children *du jour*. Words have effects. Propinquity may as readily breed

solidarity as contempt. Linguistic play leading by process of synthesis toward a naming or titling or lumping of the aggregate. A parallel process of interchange informs the individuals and organizations speaking in those terms, expressing those principles, with an eye toward seeing them realized.

When I retired, it was not with a sense of anything like “mission accomplished” (a phrase not yet the bad joke it became), but with full awareness that bad ideas never go away and that in the high-tech postmodern era they were sprouting enhanced powers of seduction and destruction (soon made all-too-evident in post-*Patriot Act* truncating of civil rights, and again in the absurd 2016 election of a billionaire real estate developer *cum* reality-show host, and installation of his reactionary, plutocratic and anti-environmental government)—but also with some hope that the good ideas and the activists to enunciate them would continue as well, and prevail.

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Greybear  
gets up early and flops Salmon out  
of his stream. Salmon flops back.  
Licking his paw does no good: he  
still can't understand the birds.

They have wings because they fly.  
Why do they fly? They fly because Greybear  
doesn't understand. They fly because  
it's there. Greybear stands in cold

water, belly small with pain,  
looking up to where the birds mate.  
Salmon sprays his oceans of meals  
over the falls

