

## Tourism of Doom

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One of my favorite pastimes, or perhaps it's just a form of escapism, is to read the Travel Section of a newspaper. It doesn't matter if I'm in Boston, New York, San Francisco, LA, or here at home, Sundays are not complete wherever I am without picking up the newspaper and pouring over the photos and stories and even advertisements of lovely coastal towns on islands I never knew existed, exotic package deals leading to the outer edges of the world, or just the highlights of whatever is happening in major tourist cities. And I pretend then to plan a trip to Paris or Tokyo or Machu Picchu or Crete, or Capetown or just the Cape, and imagine myself there knowing in which hotel I'd be staying and which restaurants I shouldn't miss.

Imagine my astonishment as I pick up the New York Times one Sunday afternoon and read about the latest travel trend called "The Tourism of Doom." Expeditions are going out and booking agents can't book fast enough the trips that people want to take to some of the world's great splendors which are now gravely imperiled. The mindset is: "Let's go there quickly. Let's see these places before they disappear."

This means a rash of tourists booking trips to the Amazon to see it in its natural state before it is completely logged or burned to the ground or turned into a cattle ranch. It means going to Kilimanjaro to see the sunrise on the highest peak in Africa before the ice cap melts. It means going to the arctic before the ice is gone. It means seeing the melting glaciers of Patagonia, the threatened coral of the Great Barrier Reef, and the eroding atolls of the Maldives. The article said, "Doom is big business." People want to see these places before they disappear.

I find this so fascinating because not that long ago, people were trying to be the first at exploring an area and not the last to say good-bye. The first person to reach the North Pole was Robert Peary in 1909, less than 100 years ago. The first to fly to the North Pole was Admiral Byrd in 1926. The first polar circumnavigation by surface travel that took ten years was completed in 1982. The first walk across the continent of Antarctica was in 1993. But the mindset now has shifted to where people want to be (not the first to climb a mountain or behold a glacier-fed lake) but to be the ones to see things last before global warming wipes them off the earth. To me it has the feel of buying a ticket to one's own funeral.

One of the great nature writers in my opinion is Annie Dillard. Her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, was written in 1982, and by coincidence I happened to pull the book down from my shelf last week and began to skim it. Her eloquence in capturing the "religious" inherent in nature's splendor, felt a little out-dated although it filled me with nostalgia. She addresses the point that our human role upon this planet is to witness...until God changes his mind or until the pagan gods slip back to their hilltop groves, all we can do with the whole natural array is watch it. We can stage our own act on the planet: build our cities on its plains, dam its rivers, plant its topsoils - - but our "meaningful" activity scarcely covers the terrain. We are here to witness. If we were not here the passage of seasons would lack meaning. The show would play to an empty house, as do all those falling stars which fall in the daytime. That's why I take walks: to keep an eye on things.

Now, 26 years later, I guess we failed to keep an eye on things. Maybe we didn't take enough walks; maybe we took our own acts on this planet too seriously; maybe we failed in our greatest role as witnesses to the creation.

But I believe there is a more grievous sin we have committed during these past twenty-six years, and that is what James Carse would describe as “willful ignorance.” Central to Carse’s argument is what he classifies as three kinds of ignorance: ordinary ignorance meaning a mundane lack of knowledge such as ignorance of Utah’s victory over Michigan three weeks ago; willful ignorance meaning an intended avoidance of accessible knowledge, like the rejection of scientific facts. Last year a friend of mine gave me *The Republican War Against Science* to read – (I don’t think a really good friend would have done that), but my frustration with the book was all due to this “willful” ignorance. Worse than an ostrich afraid of grim news.

Carse finally ends up with a category called “higher ignorance” which means humbly owning up to our own ignorance before the majesty and mystery of the infinite cosmos instead of pretending we hold in our possession THE ONE TRUTH. Imagine if all the world’s religions accepted this state of higher ignorance...what the world would be like. Jews, Muslims, Christians, Hindus witnessing the creation while shrugging their shoulders and saying: “So who really knows?” Unitarianism has always prided itself on Higher Ignorance, but it’s not a good marketing tool.

The battle between the political left and right on what to do about human-caused climate change and fossil fuels, has led to nothing but an angry stalemate, and has prevented us from taking more responsible actions that might have prevented the tourism of doom from beckoning our vacation lust. The right called Global warming a “hoax” or perhaps a “minor irritant,” but who cares? It’s the fossil-fueled engine that drives the economy, and that’s what matters. Industry strongly opposed limits on greenhouse gases. Big oil, big coal, and anti-regulatory libertarians thwarted any attempts to curb smokestack and tailpipe gases that trap heat. The planet just got more and more trashed.

But before I blame the right and libertarians and industry for their ‘willful ignorance,’ I need to examine my own. Long before *An Inconvenient Truth* shocked us into the call for action, Al Gore wrote a book in 1992 called *Earth in the Balance*. I read it when it came out. And I put it on my shelf when I was done with a great sigh. And that was all. It didn’t even merit a sermon. I was still caught up in an Annie Dillard sentimental world. I could not imagine nature playing to an empty house. My spirituality was essentially tied up with witnessing the splendor and taking walks in order to keep my eye on things.

Gore wrote *Earth in the Balance* after becoming interested in global warming when he took a course at Harvard a long time back from Professor Roger Revelle. Revelle was one of the first scientists to measure Carbon Dioxide in the atmosphere. In fact, he was the very first chairman of the Committee on Climate Change and Oceans in 1958.

In 1997, Gore helped broker the Kyoto Protocol designed to curb greenhouse gas emissions. But it failed ratification in the House after the senate voted 95-0 in support. Kind of close, but what did any of us really do eleven years ago to change the consensus, demanding that the leader of the free world make a commitment to preserve the creation we all hold sacred and sign the damn protocol?

After losing the election to George Bush in 2000, Gore continued his focus on the topic of global warming, adapting a slide show he had compiled years earlier. Before he was asked to turn this all into his legendary film in 2006, he had given more than 1000 power point presentations across America and throughout much of the world. I thought he did look a little weary.

Although *An Inconvenient Truth* sounded the alarm in dramatic fashion, young environmentalists since then have been exceptionally critical of the film and the technique of sending dark environmental messages. Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger state that Martin Luther King’s success was attributed not to a speech called “I have a Nightmare,” but because he delivered the memorable “I have

a Dream” speech. These young environmentalists say we need a politics that is positive and inspires people around an exciting and inspiring vision.

But how much time do we have? Do we need a vision? Yes. Is time of the essence? Yes. I read a book review the other day where the reviewer wrote that energy and environmental policies are still forged mainly in the way Dr. Doolittle’s two headed pushmi-pullyu walked. (It didn’t move much).

So how do we get unstuck? How do we get beyond the impasse that has made Tourism of Doom the sick reality it is?

I wonder if the one fundamental theoretical question has ever been addressed within the environmental movement: Do you think your way into a new way of acting...or do you act your way into a new way of thinking. Is an environmentally sustainable lifestyle an intellectual exercise that might convince me to change my habits, or will my downsizing of home and car and consumerism bring me to a new level of understanding. If you prefer thinking your way into a new way of acting then you might as well pick up a book with a title something like: “How to End Global Warming in Your spare Time.”

Frankly, I have all the information I need to compel me to act responsibly. But am I somehow caught in this category called **willful ignorance**? Me? Of course, and mostly everyone else. There is simply no legitimate excuse not to act: Republican, Democrat, liberal, conservative, oil tycoon, fisherman, coal miner, farmer, CEO, minister. From here on out, it’s willful ignorance...so we can enjoy our sense of entitlement a little longer.

Another key barrier to acting (shall we say “morally” since earth hangs in the balance?), another barrier to our doing what we know needs to be done was raised by the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant who served as the fountain of inspiration for our Transcendentalists in New England during the 1830’s, 40s, and 50s. Kant raised a troubling question to which we still have no response. Simply put it is this: Do you believe that a morally good world will result from your own good conduct? That is, will our moral actions translate into making the whole world morally good? Here’s the conundrum we face, or at least the challenge for our time in history: If we believe that we cannot produce a morally good world by doing the right thing, then why bother? The reason we don’t check out entirely, Kant said, is because we try to believe in or have faith in a God or at least a future state that is morally compelling in order to sustain our own moral commitment. Kant’s premise, it seems to me, is that it is faith that prompts us to act morally, because without faith in some ultimate moral harmony in the universe, we wouldn’t act morally ourselves. We act morally not because we are afraid of hell but because we believe in a moral world in the future.

Has the environmental movement posed this question or even understood it? What would motivate me to live with less, as is morally prescribed for a sustainable planet, if I do not believe a good world will be the result by my right actions. I may act morally and responsibly, but my neighbor won’t and neither will most of China and India. It’s like a child caught cheating on an exam: “Hey, everybody is doing it. I just got caught.” How do you convey to the child that it would be a better world if he didn’t cheat?

I think the problem is this: Our own moral standards are pretty high. We know what is expected, what is needed, what our role in all this ought to be. But we live in a world unfriendly to our own moral standards. Do we nonetheless live up to our own moral standards even if we can’t make the world live up to those standards? That’s very much an individual decision, not a mass movement which is what the urgency of the matter really demands.

The sands of time to reverse our dilemma have pretty much run out. The moral question, however, still stands before us. And once we stop playing games through willful ignorance, the moral imperative will become transparently obvious. I will act as I should, even if it may not make the world more moral.

There's something within me that resists striving to be the last one to see the Great Barrier Reef or the melting glaciers of Patagonia. It would be like the last one turning out the lights. I'm a bit afraid of the dark, I guess. And I can't even imagine the passage of seasons playing to an empty house. If there still will be such a thing as seasons.

But if I want to claim that my own moral standards are high, then I have no choice but to conduct my life accordingly. And so perhaps old Immanuel Kant was right. It does boil down to faith. I have to believe that my moral conduct will produce a morally good world. I'm not going to worry about my neighbors and their extravagance. I'll just worry about my own moral conduct. And not just thinking about how to act morally, but acting morally until my mind finally gets it.

I think this afternoon I'll take a walk...to keep an eye on things and to serve as witness. But to witness the creation not just as a spectator, but as a steward who is morally obligated to care for it, to nurture it, to protect it from harm. I must reaffirm my faith that my own moral conduct can and will produce a morally good world. It is an act of faith, but after all is said and done, isn't it faith that moves us forward? Amen