
WHITEWATER RIVER LETTER

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JOURNAL OF A PRAIRIE YEAR

Publication Announcement

Paul Gruchow’s first book – JOURNAL OF A PRAIRIE YEAR – has been recently published by Milkweed Editions after being out of print for several years.

Acclaimed by naturalists and poets, many lovers of the tall grass prairie consider Gruchow’s book the finest ever written about that once thriving ecosystem.

“To live on the prairie is to daydream. It is the only conceivable response to such immensity. It is when we are smallest that our daydreams come quickest.”

Paul Gruchow

BOUNDARY WATERS: THE GRACE OF THE WILD

The Minneapolis Tribune has named Paul Gruchow’s BOUNDARY WATERS: THE GRACE OF THE WILD one of five books everyone should read about the wilderness.



The Paul Gruchow Foundation

The Paul Gruchow Foundation works to foster awareness of the relationship between nature, creativity, community and mental health.

FROM THE DIRECTOR

The WHITEWATER RIVER LETTER is modeled after Paul Gruchow's own CANNON RIVER LETTER, a small but influential mailer distributed in the mid 1990's when Paul lived in Northfield, Minnesota. The original LETTER contained essays, poems, commentary and short book reviews.

The decision to revive LETTER is part of a larger project which aims to preserve Paul Gruchow's legacy, to make his published and unpublished writing available to a wider audience, and, through the foundation bearing his name, to foster awareness of the relationship between nature, creativity, community and mental health.

This second edition of WHITEWATER RIVER LETTER contains writing about land, energy, education and economy. The black and white photographs were taken by Minnesota native John Gregor (Cold Snap Photography, Two Harbors, Minnesota) and are gratefully used with his permission. To see these – and other John Gregor photographs – in color, go to our website at www.paulgruchowfoundation.org.

The Paul Gruchow Foundation is a tax exempt, non-profit organization established in 2007. A more detailed description of the objectives and activities of the foundation can be found on our website at www.paulgruchow.org or by calling The Paul Gruchow Foundation Center at (507) 263-0081. All contributions made to the Paul Gruchow Foundation are tax deductible.

We welcome your questions, comments, essays, poems, book reviews, and letters. Our mailing address is: The Paul Gruchow Foundation/33246 Highway 56 Blvd./ Dennison, MN 55018

Louis Martinelli
Executive Director, Editor



Photograph John Gregor

LANDSCAPE AND DESIRE: QUESTIONNAIRE

by Paul Gruchow, 1995 © Louis Martinelli, 2009

1. In the European tradition, landscapes — a painters' idea — began as visions of beauty, of serenity. They were rural, pastoral, idealizing the life of county people; then they came to include scenes from nature, great waterfalls and mountain ranges; and then renderings of skyscraper canyons and other urban scenes — still on a grand scale; and then — with the help of photographers — images of garbage cans in alleys — ironically monumental; and then of various kinds of debris, living and inanimate, scattered through scenes of degradation or desolation. Which has changed more, the landscape or how we look at it?
2. Is a degraded landscape more sophisticated than a pristine one? More realistic? Less romantic?
3. Why is gardening the most widely practiced hobby in the United States? When you can't resist planting a few peas in the back yard on the first warm day of spring, what is it that you crave? Peas?
4. The word "wilderness" acquired positive connotations only quite recently. Before the mid-nineteenth century, in the European-American tradition, wilderness — especially those features of wilderness that we know think particularly lovely: seacoasts, islands, mountains, forests — was regarded as frightful, ugly, even evil. Wilderness was wasteland. The impulse to tame the American wilderness arouse not so much out of greed as out of the misguided conviction that both good stewardship and fealty to beauty required the domestication of the land. The idea of wilderness as a good thing took root and prospered as our culture became more urban and industrial. What unfulfilled need in contemporary life does wilderness satisfy? Why?
5. Is it possible to go anywhere, even into a remote wilderness, alone?
6. Wilderness has been associated in many cultures with spiritual revelation. Is it what is absent from wilderness that prompts revelation, or what is present there? Would you describe your experiences of wilderness as spiritual? In what way?
7. Are wilderness and civilization opposites, or are they mirror images?
8. Is it possible to love well, say, Yellowstone National Park without also caring about Cody, Wyoming, and the Idaho ranches just beyond the park's western boundary?
9. Is the distinction between living creatures and inanimate objects real? Or is biocentrism the same kind of mistake as anthropocentrism?
10. Does it matter where one was born or lives? Is landscape merely the inci-

dental background of your life, or has it in some way defined or shaped your experience?

11. Supposing that people and landscapes are distinguishable, where does one end and the other begin? Do I begin and end at the outermost cells of my skin? Am I in any respect constructed out of those things that I have seen and heard, smelled and touched, tasted? Suppose that I could remember none of these things? Would I still be the same person?
12. Can a healthy community be sustained in a sick landscape?
13. Can a place be a consolation?
14. Nostalgia: a wistful desire to return in thought or in fact to a former time in one's life, to one's home or homeland, or to one's family and friends. A transgression against reason, the treason of those who doubt the perfection incipient in the present moment. What is your relationship to the landscapes of your past – home, family, friends?
15. We really can't go home again? If we can't, does this mean that we need not remember home, that the memory of it has nothing to teach us? What has changed more, the landscape of your past or how you look at it?
16. We do, however, believe in a better tomorrow. Why is it delusion to regret what has been lost, but sanity to trust in what has not yet happened?



REVISITING PAUL GRUCHOW'S BACK ROADS

by Loren Gustafson

I was drawn to Paul Gruchow's writing even before I understood that he was working on the identity problems of growing up in a disappearing rural culture similar to my own. When I first saw the Back Roads essays in *Minnesota Monthly* in 1986, I wondered how to pronounce his name (GREW-coe, I later learned) and wondered where he had come from, this accomplished writer with an interest in plants and birds, haymows and bovine growth hormone, the Boundary Waters and Disney World. The Back Roads columns seemed completely unlike journalistic essays – they were more wide-ranging and philosophical. An essay about sandhill cranes could begin with a story about falling from a barn. A discussion of the life of Mari Sandoz would veer off into consideration of what conditions help to create and nurture an artistic temperament. Three disparate stories about recent experiences could be suddenly drawn together with a deeper insight about the responsibility for citizen involvement in public questions. The writing was unpredictable and full of possibility, searching and never formulaic. The only apparent constant was Gruchow's curiosity about the less-traveled roads, both literal and metaphorical.

I saved these essays when they first appeared, though I could not have said why. Only later, when Gruchow published *Grass Roots: The Universe of Home*, did I see a bigger picture: he was writing about leaving farm life behind and seeking another way to make a living and to make sense of a life. His father, like mine, knew that what he did as a farmer was valuable – because people need food to live. As more and more people move further away from responding to basic needs of food and shelter, they face questions about purpose and meaning. In a variety of ways, these essays speak to the question of what happens when we leave the farm and our close ties with nature and try to find another way of living that makes sense. In the Back Roads essays, Gruchow explores the locations and ideas of modern America while constantly circling back to consider what it means to be person from a rural place in an increasingly “placeless” urban world.

For me, Gruchow’s Back Roads essay “What Cranes Say” serves as a starting point for understanding the power of his writing from this period. This essay taught me about the great sandhill crane migration, but it also inspired me to see it for myself. I made my own journey to see the cranes rise by the thousands from Nebraska’s Platte River at sunrise and have returned on six other occasions, though it has now been more than a decade since the last (hopefully not final) one. On the first morning I stood on a bridge on a gravel road near Grand Island, the fog lifted after the sun was already above the horizon, and tens of thousands of cranes gave a croaking cacophony that called to mind a football stadium cheer. At some point I knew that I’d stopped trying to understand the natural world and was standing in awe within it. Only now, many years later, do I return to the original essay and marvel at the suggestive power of Gruchow’s description of the sound that cranes make:

It is the rattling of dry bones in a gourd—half cackle, half rasp, hoarse and unmusical, a primeval cry repeated a thousand times over. It fills the landscape, throbs and pulses like the roaring of a vast crowd, sweeps over you in waves, reverberates in the bones of your skull. The frenzied sound might be angry or ecstatic; it is impossible to tell. But it has always the tone of something faintly dangerous—of something raw and uncontainable, like the screaming of any mob.

The belabored syntax of the sentences suggests the multiple, layered croaking of the cranes, but the passage subtly turns to the psychology of the listener: Gruchow implies that it is the note of danger, the uncontrolled mob, that draws us back. We hear in the cranes’ voices something that we miss in our everyday human world: the mystery of nature in all its wildness.

The essay begins by weaving together the story of Gruchow’s falling from a barn and being “resurrected” (12), his reflections on some memorable life experiences (distinguishing between the merely sensational and truly gratifying), and

his thoughts upon rereading Hesse's *Siddharta*. He finds Siddharta's life a disappointment: "I learned rereading his story, that the search for community interests me a good deal more these days than the search for self" (12). The story of the journey to see the cranes continues that insight, building to a paragraph that finds in the ever-evolving community of the nuclear family a lesson about the human family more generally:

Every March is a new March. We can see it in our children. Every March they stand taller, speak more articulately, respond in more-complex ways to the accumulated memories of March mornings spent on the edge of a particular stretch of meadow in southwestern Nebraska. We know it in how we pack for the trip. We have advanced from cartons of Pampers and jar of Gerbers to six-packs of Mountain Dew and tapes of The Monkees. We can hear it in their voices. Mother Goose and bawls of hunger are out. "Ninety-nine Bottles of Beer" and sibling bickerings are in. We are headed inexorably toward a March day when we will pack a single suitcase in the trunk – just the two of us, Nancy and I – and start again for Nebraska to hear the cranes. That is the day we seek for our children – that they should be forever growing, maturing, changing, moving in ever-widening circles away from us. We can already see them changing in ways that neither we nor they can fully understand. We wish that we could prepare them for life ahead, that we could predict what will lie around the next bend, that we could make the way a little easier. But we know only that life is short and full of surprises. That is why we go to Nebraska every spring in search of cranes. We need to be reassured that there is order and logic in things, that there is predictability and regularity in life, that some things stand fast and hold firm. The cranes never disappoint us. The cranes are always there. (17)

Though the passage seems to be about the experience of taking children on car trips – as encapsulated in the lists of supplies and music – it moves to an insight about the need for a reassurance of order behind change. A parent cannot supply a guarantee of order and logic: "life is short and full of surprises." Reassurance comes from the collective migration of the cranes. We may outlive all the cranes that we see, but their collective journey will continue unchanged. Human journeys do not continue unchanged; they are only connected by a desire to find a meaning. Given the subsequent course of Gruchow's life – including his estrangement from his wife, his major depression, his attempt to reconnect with the world of nature that had sustained his writing, his ultimate death from a drug overdose – the passage is both prophetic and ironic. He assumed that he would still be making that journey with his wife well after his children had left home. His plan was to be there every March to find the reassurance that he needed.

Late in the essay we learn that the day is Easter Sunday, bringing nature and culture back together in this vision of the cranes winging up, connecting this journey with the seemingly unrelated story of falling out of a barn and being resurrected at the start of the essay. The final passage of the essay pulls together the competing impulses for wildness and for community and family:

Part of me ached to follow [the cranes], to rise up on wings of my own, to fly to some wild and unbounded place. My daughter approached from behind and put her arm around me, startling me. We hugged. Looking at her, I saw that she was almost a young woman—hardly a child anymore. I saw in her green pupils a mysterious and uncharted territory. I saw how happy I was to be taking her home with me one more time. (17)

Gruchow speaks of his own “migratory restlessness,” some mysterious genetic predisposition to escape a constrained reality, and it is the hug from his daughter that draws him back. The resolution creates a “happy ending” without any false optimism, since the resolution is only temporary: “one more time” implies the coming day when this reality ends.

When Gruchow revised this essay for *Necessity of Empty Places*, he took out all references to his family. In retrospect, it is tempting to see this change as a telling sign of troubles to come, of looming disconnection and depression, especially since it contradicts what he said in the earlier essay about being more interested in the search for community than the search for self. I’ve come to reject that line of thinking, however. After the fact, we always find “clues” that should have told us what was going to happen, but life is unpredictable. Within the context of *Necessity of Empty Places*, there are good rhetorical reasons for making the trip a solo journey about personal discovery because the book is about an artist’s journey to understand why we need empty places away from the busy pace of modern life. Nonetheless, I prefer the Back Roads essay because it conveys both the power of



Photograph John Gregor

life lived in community and the power of connection to nature. Those are, in fact, the deep connections of farm life. In *Necessity*, we see the reviving power of nature's empty places, but we miss out on the deeper conflicts and joys of community life.

Perhaps the Back Roads essay captured my interest because Paul and I shared a desire both to escape and to honor our farming roots, a way of life that was passing away. In my own experience on a dairy farm in Goodhue County, Minnesota, silo-filling parties, which brought neighboring farmers together for a few weeks each fall to work in each other's fields and eat at each other's tables, gradually disappeared in the 1970s as air-conditioned tractors and self-unloading wagons made it possible to complete the task alone. We were both ambivalent about "getting out," and not living out the experience of farm life, the vision handed down of a life grounded in the soil. (Paul noted that his family gatherings had become more about nostalgia than about the here and now.) Paul's guilt about leaving the farm was likely compounded by also getting out of the small-town newspaper business with a hefty buyout at the right moment. He wrote, in his Preface to the tenth anniversary edition of *Necessity of Empty Places*, of watching from across the street as his former coworkers were shown the door one by one, what he saw as a "corporate massacre." He must also have felt guilty about not having given his children the grounding in the way of the soil, of the rural farming community, that his parents, for all their shortcomings, gave him. In his essay on Mari Sandoz, "Music for Christmas," he ends by reflecting on "our own middle-class efforts at raising superchildren" and faults himself for "want[ing] to spare them from every pain, from every failure or deprivation, however trivial" (12/1987: 30). He continues by comparing his own efforts as a parent with those of Mari Sandoz's parents: "Are we doing any better by our own children than Old Jules and Mary did by their daughter? I suppose only time will tell, but I doubt it. The more I think about it, the more I doubt it" (30). Now that I am a parent as well, I doubt it too. But perhaps this kind of doubt is simply a luxury earlier generations could not afford.

Gruchow saw that we made constant tradeoffs between community and progress, as is clear in this passage about the virtues of communal farm life:

The Bensons, however, clean their fields the way we did when I was a child: on foot and with a garden hoe sharpened to a wicked edge. There is nothing romantic about it; it is hot, hard, bone-wearing, monotonous labor, and the only pleasure in it is to be finished with it. I am unabashedly grateful now to be able to remember it and write about it without actually having to do it. (10/1986: 21)

He goes on to note that "David Benson still belongs to a shelling ring, a group of farmers who share a corn sheller and the common work of completing the harvest" (22). When he says, "I think living and working in a community is one of

the lost values” (21), he does not mean we are better off without that value. In ways we little understand, we are impoverished by that loss. Suffering in and of itself is not ennobling. Redeemed suffering and shared hardship, however, call us to a fuller life. As Paul wrote, in referring to his father’s values, which made time to plan for the planting of flowers and not just cash crops: “I have often betrayed, but never forgotten....”

Gruchow suggested that as we have lost our continuity with earlier generation we have also lost our sense of responsibility to the whole natural system as something beautiful and worthy of our care. He wrote about his deep mistrust of synthetic Bovine Growth Hormone, but also of the need for citizens to help fund the research that would determine whether it was safe. He wrote about his struggles to convince the local weed inspector that poisoning native flowers was not a good approach to his work. He described his even more quixotic attempt to convince the local historical society that preservation of the natural heritage should be as much a part of their work as collecting cultural artifacts. In his final Back Roads essay, he called for laws against “land abuse” and made the case that protecting endangered species is an urgent necessity for our own preservation: “Count all of these [endangered species] expendable if you wish, but remember that we, like they, are ultimately fragile creatures, clinging tenuously to life by threads we cannot see, and that we too can be cut down, even by our own awkward hands” (3/1989: 28). It’s hard not to read this final thought of this set of essays as a prophetic personal and cultural warning. We are indeed fragile creatures, subject to all kinds of mental and physical ailments and malfunctions.

When I reread these essays, I still hear a different drummer with an urgent message. Like a hiker on a poorly marked trail, a lost writer may need to retrace steps and begin again to find the way. In his later Minnesota DNR essays, Gruchow wrote ever more specialized essays about nature’s unknown places. In *Grass Roots* he delved directly into his family of origin, mining his experience and expanding on the portraits of his parents that appear in the Back Roads essays. Only in his final book did he look directly at the shadows of the isolation and abuse that he endured as a child, a dark side of family life only hinted at in *Grass Roots* and in essays such as “Music for Christmas.” But the journey was unfinished in that he never wrote of his own experience of fatherhood and marriage. That part was apparently too painful or too personal to confront in writing. Or perhaps he simply ran out of time. I find myself looking to him for insights that must come from my own experience and reflection.

In writing about these essays, I want to reach people who don’t understand the appeal that this work has – who have perhaps heard Paul Gruchow referred to as Minnesota’s Thoreau (a connection that is most explicit in *Boundary Waters*), but don’t connect with the underlying values that guide his work: connection to community and place, continuity from parents to children, and reverence

for nature and the natural world. His words allowed me to see the cranes on the Platte, and the wilderness staircase at Rose Lake in the Boundary Waters, built by the CCC in the 1930s, and a sunset at Blue Mounds State Park, but the point is bigger than any particular journey. These essays show the process of discovering connections between our lives and the landscape around us, connections absent in the mediated environments in which we mostly live. He was struggling with these issues that affect us all and that especially affect those of us who grew up with a personal connection to nature. We can learn from his struggle.

Since Paul's death in 2004, I've come to know him better through one of his close friends, Lou Martinelli, who serves as his literary executor and, by some wild quirk of fate, rents out my old bedroom in my parents' farmhouse. At first it was amazing enough to me to think that I had a great aunt and uncle who lived in the town where Paul had been the editor of the local newspaper (Worthington). Then, later, when I was attending graduate school at the University of Minnesota, where Paul had edited the student paper, he and his wife lived in Northfield, just ten miles from my childhood home. Paul taught for a time at St. Olaf College and (I later learned) rode his bike past the farm where I grew up. I even met him briefly at an event at The Loft when *The Necessity of Empty Places* was published. Now the mail for the Paul Gruchow Foundation arrives at my parents' house. I continue to think about his life and his work and his death. After trying to make sense of his major depression and the last years of his life, I finally realized that the problem was mine, not his. In that respect, reading Paul Gruchow's Back Roads essays is more about my own life than about his. But now they are intertwined because his words have led me to new ideas and new places.

So I return to "What Cranes Say" and am haunted by Paul's realization that the cranes will still be there in Nebraska in March in twenty or two hundred years – and by his stated belief that he would continue to make that pilgrimage to the Platte River each spring, that he knows where he will be. Like him, I have ceased to make the yearly journey, but I still hope to make it with my children someday, as he did, before it is too late. I still hope to show them a world that is off the beaten path, that is not a Disney world but something wild and unbounded and unmediated by anything, not even by Paul Gruchow's version of it. I want them to feel that there is a world beyond human control in which we have a place. I think back on my journeys to see the cranes as moments of calm in a now more hectic life, and I wonder: if the sustaining power of nature in the cranes and elsewhere was not enough to carry Paul through, what can the rest of us expect? There's a poignant moment close to the end of his final manuscript in which he says he can feel the smell of the pine trees healing his mind and body. What went wrong, and what can any of us do about it? When I read these Back Roads essays or drive my air-conditioned Subaru down a gravel road, it is the mystery of these questions that swirls behind me.

IS A “BACK TO THE LAND” MOVEMENT POSSIBLE?

by Ted Gostomski

I have to admit to a certain amount of pessimism when I hear talk about a “back to the land” movement. For me, the phrase conjures images of 1960s communes, bushy-faced men and straight-haired women, and the *Whole Earth Catalog*. I know these are all stereotypes, but they are reinforced by a simple Google search on the internet. Try it, and you’ll see all the subtle implications of a snickering society in phrases such as “tree hugger,” “natural foods,” and “modest farmhouse.” I think such images hinder progress on the back to the land concept before it can even begin. The impediment, at least for me, is in the ambiguity of the charge. What does “back to the land” mean anyway?

I think “back to the land” describes a change in thinking and the actions that result from those changes. It is the moment of pause that comes between the thought of doing something and the unconscious act of carrying out that thought. It is the consideration we give to distinguishing between needs and wants, and choosing to fulfill the former. It is the purposeful (some might say sacred) regard we have for the place where we physically live and the connections between us and all that share that place with us. I think the back to the land movement encompasses many things, but right now, most of the movement is about how and from where we acquire our food.

Consider this: a family of four chooses to grow a vegetable garden, whether on a plot of ground or in pots on a high-rise balcony, because it saves them a little money on food expenses. The cost savings alone, even if only realized during the summer months, is a good enough reason, but there are other considerations. In making this choice, the family improves their relationship with the land (they go “back to the land”) because (a) they put time and energy into growing their own food rather than supporting the grocer’s long-distance supplier for whom the cost of pesticides, to ensure “healthy” plant growth, and fuel, for shipping the produce to the market, are built into the price the family pays at the cash register. (Actually, the supplier probably ships the food to a distributor, who ships it to the market, incurring their own fuel costs, which are also included in the consumer’s price.); (b) they reduced their contribution to greenhouse gases emitted by the trucks used to ship the produce; (c) they experience the pleasure of consuming vegetables fresh off the vine and in their season; (d) they have learned a skill that helps to take their minds off of work or whatever other issues of the day are wearing on them; and (e) they can feel a justified sense of pride in providing for themselves. Sure, one can argue that the trucks are going to be on the road anyway, or that no one has time these days to keep up with potting and weeding and watering, or that by forsaking the grocery store, they are diminishing their support of the local community. But these are all excuses not to take responsibility for our actions, and that is what the back to the land movement is all

about – being accountable for our actions and living responsibly. Going back to the land does not diminish the support we give our communities; there is almost always more we need from the store than we can provide for ourselves. Going back to the land also does not stop hundreds of thousands of deliv-



Photograph John Gregor

ery trucks from taking to the highway; but each of us is complicit in the contributions those trucks make to the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and the subsequent climate change we are experiencing.

It is easy to continue living as we always have and tell ourselves, “I am only one person. What can I do? I can’t change the world.” Maybe you’re right; maybe you can’t change the world. But you and I can change ourselves. We have to start somewhere; we have to make changes, no matter how small, in our own lives to have any hope of seeing changes on a larger scale. Big steps are not required. Indeed, big steps are not really an option for most people. Little steps count the most in this movement. Turning off lights when you leave a room, buying “green” house cleaning supplies, composting fruit and vegetable scraps, recycling, using compact fluorescent light bulbs, carpooling, buying a hybrid vehicle or at least one that gets better than 25 miles to the gallon (a minimum of 30 is preferable); these are all things each of us can do. Start small and take bigger steps as you are able.

You don’t have to leave home to get “back to the land.” Getting back to the land starts at home. There is a time-worn saying about not underestimating the ability of a small group of concerned and active citizens to change the world. It’s inspirational and it’s true, of course, but I think it’s difficult to feel you are part of a group when you are trying to make changes at home and you may not even have the support of your family. For those times, there is another reminder that I think is infinitely more helpful. It was originally said by novelist E.L. Doctorow about writing, but it is broadly applicable, so I will paraphrase it: “[Getting back to the land] is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights but you can make the whole trip that way.” Go slow, but get going.

ONE SIMPLE RECOMMENDATION

by Paul Theobald

The distribution of income in the United States since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 went from something so middle-class dominated that it was literally the envy of the world to something that makes the worst excesses of the Middle Ages seem modest by comparison. Systematically removing any legal or regulatory obstacle to the unlimited accumulation of wealth, including drastic reductions to the highest income tax rate and to the estate tax, not to mention the removal of rules and restrictions in the financial industry – rules put in place after the Depression so that we would never again have to experience the catastrophic fallout that accompanies bank failures – all of this created a small class of super-rich and a very large class of working, and looking-for-work, poor.

Democratic theorists from Aristotle to Thomas Jefferson to Wendell Berry warned against this. They each argued again and again that if a republic is to last it must cultivate frugality among its citizens, never allowing vast extremes between wealth and poverty to develop. Our generation, like the generation that came of age during the 1920s, should clearly understand why. But even a lesson this obvious can be rendered confusing by those with the power to manipulate public opinion. So this is where my suggestion for President Obama kicks in.

One negative development accompanying the acquisition of enormous wealth has been the incredible proliferation of privately-supported “think tanks.” This phenomenon is a direct response to the inability of the super-rich to influence or dictate to university professors what type of research they will do and what kind of results they will show. The centuries-long tradition of blind peer-review has served as a fairly effective obstacle to the efforts of the super-rich to co-opt the nation’s research agenda. I say “fairly effective” because it is not, nor could it ever be, a perfect deterrent to “research for hire.” Sloppy studies sometimes get through the system, and greedy professors sometimes do deals with the devil. But, generally speaking, America’s universities are the envy of the world because they respect the traditions that have kept self-interest far from the definition of the ideal professorial life.

Unfortunately, with the extraordinary wealth that accrued during the 1990s came the ability of the super-rich to simply by-pass American universities and set up their own university research substitute, a system known as think tanks. Think tanks produce the research that is bought and paid for by the think tank benefactors. Unburdened by the nuisance of blind peer-review, they are free to utilize any methodology that will enable them to say what they want the American public to hear. Newspapers and broadcast news shows report the results of this research as if it were gospel and therefore beyond question. On top of this,

the George W. Bush administration made heavy use of think tank directors and employees on government-sponsored commissions and task forces – further extending the reach of the super-rich in terms of manipulating what the public thinks.

My one simple recommendation for President Obama is to render think tanks as powerless as possible by 1) refusing to seat think tank directors or employees on any government-sponsored entity and 2) by exposing the self-interest behind the research produced by these entities. Our President could easily propose a bill which would mandate that a government warning appear on any research document that has not undergone a university-based, blind, peer-review process in the same way that our government mandates warning labels on other potentially dangerous products.

Compared to fixing our economy, or solving the dilemmas posed by our recent military misadventures, this is an easy one for the President. Still, if he were to attend to this recommendation, and the public, as a result, was not subjected to so many deliberate attempts to obfuscate our current circumstances, President Obama might find that he would have any easier time on the really big issues.



STRONGER LABOR UNIONS ARE KEY TO REBUILDING OUR ECONOMY

by Richard A. Levins

I spoke at the Rural Life celebration in Little Falls, Minnesota, this past August. Something like 800 people sat on hay bales stretched across a farm field in the noonday sun. The Bishop, several priests, and a group of altar servers sat patiently as I walked toward the tent where Mass had just been said.

What can a person who is both Catholic and an economist say under such circumstances? Would I be excommunicated on the spot? Would my college take back my PhD?

I began by confessing that as an economist I had for years taught college freshmen about the views of Adam Smith. He's the "original economist" who famously said that individual effort, guided by personal self interest, would lead us toward the best of all worlds. In our age of sound bites, this has translated into "greed is good" and "the individual reigns supreme".

I suppose I could have tried to sidestep as much as I could by explaining that Adam Smith wrote in a 200-year-old world that bears virtually no resemblance to today's modern economy. Had I done that, I would have followed up with some explanation of how sound bite economics and actually reading what the early economists wrote lead us to very different interpretations of their work.

Somehow, the idea of doing that for very long in such circumstances would leave everyone bored, and more than a few suffering heat stroke.

As fate would have it, the choir was singing a refrain of “we can make a difference” before I spoke. “We”, not “I”, can make a difference. That, in terms both economists and people of faith can understand, tells the story. There is something special about people acting together for the common good. Individual action is important, but by no means the whole story. The same idea applies in Catholic tradition. Individual actions are important, but so is the special experience of people worshipping together.

I held up a copy of the text I used in my freshman economics classes at the University of Minnesota. If economics has a Bible, it is no doubt Nobel-Laureate Paul Samuelson’s classic, co-authored in its eighteenth edition with Yale economist William Nordhaus. Most everyone settled down and leaned forward a little when I quoted the text as saying that a free market system without government was like one hand clapping.

One hand clapping? Not exactly the “no government is good government” mantra so favored by Wall Street, but there it is, nonetheless. As I ticked off the reasons Samuelson and Nordhaus used to justify the role of government in a well-functioning economy, people began to see that government, that is, “we”, plays a very important role in the economy. Without that “we”, our economy will be less, not more, efficient and less likely to treat everyone fairly.

I ended with something Ron Mattos, a friend and vice president of the National Farmers Organization wrote:

“We have learned over the years that when it comes to farming, helping your neighbor is a big part of helping yourself. We must get away from dog-eat-dog competition that costs us our neighbors and move toward a world where cooperation keeps us all strong and independent.”

As the community walked toward the barn to share lunch, everyone knew that the individual act of getting food to go and eating alone would never do. The community was more, much more, than the sum of its parts. This is what I would remind President Obama, too: individual effort, without the strength of working together, is another example of what the textbook calls “one hand clapping”. That strength of working together toward a fair and growing economy is embodied in labor unions.

In December of 2007, I read this in the *New York Times*: “The inflation-adjusted hourly wage for rank-and-file workers has risen by just a penny over the last four years... Over the last year, they have actually fallen.” Stagnant wages might make sense if the economy hadn’t been growing. But the economy was growing. The problem is the super wealthy, not wage earners, collected the lion’s share of the benefits.

There is no economic law that says a productive economy must give all the gains to a few super rich owners. Wages grew substantially during the time we were growing the middle class. For example, during 1947-1973, economist Paul Krugman says that wages, adjusted for inflation, grew by 81 percent. What's changed?

The answer, in a nutshell, is that when wages were rising, we had strong unions to negotiate those wages and benefits. Today, administrative policies, especially those under President George W. Bush, have so weakened unions that they can no longer maintain middle class wages the way they once did. It's a simple question of the balance of power in our economy. That power can be in the hands of wage earners, as it was then, or in the hands of wealthy owners, as it is now.

A few years ago, a farmer from western Minnesota told me something I will never forget. He said, "Dick, how big the pie is on the dinner table is only half the story of whether you will go away hungry. The other half is how big your fork is." Until we restore the economic power of labor unions, the middle class will have to make do with a small fork.

If he is to be successful in restoring our economy, President Obama must make strengthening the labor movement his first priority. This will create the power base to move forward with the other reforms we need. Without that power base, all other proposals will remain where they have been for decades, that is, as nice ideas that go nowhere in a world where Wall Street reigns supreme.



MEMO TO PRESIDENT O'BAMA: Seven Suggestions For Improving America's Health and Economy

by Louis Martinelli

I know you're busy listening to experts tell you how to rescue the economy, but I'd like to offer some non-expert advice that will cost nothing:

1. Tell everyone to slow down. The pace of life in America during the past twenty five years has increased to the point where speed itself is a major mental, physical and environmental health issue. Stress and depression, obesity, cardiovascular disease and cancer, automobile accidents, pollution and soil erosion all increase as the pace of our lives increases.
2. Impose limits on the size of new buildings; decrease the scale while increasing the number and variety of infra structure projects; support sustainable size cities; talk about how "less is more" and "more is less."

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3. Every day, replace 10 government bean counter bureaucrats with 100 renewable energy workers. Stop government welfare subsidies to giant corporations that support toxic land abuse. Help make it possible for small farmers, local growers and distributors to earn a living without poisoning us. De-politicize the DNR. Support ecology based management.
 4. Create a cabinet level position – Secretary of Intergenerational Affairs – to replace the Health, Education and Welfare bureaucracy and its derivatives. Make intergenerational themes a priority of the National Endowment For The Arts and Humanities. Develop programs designed to overcome intergenerational alienation, neglect and abuse.
 5. Require all public schools – K-Ph.D – to become community centers. Stop deifying science education at the expense of art and humanities education. Forbid educational administrators, community planners, health and human service professionals, from doing “needs assessment” and “risk management.” Make policy based on capacity and ability rather than need and deficiency. Remind everyone that growth is risky, health communal, life-long learning the essential precondition of a democracy.
 6. Abolish the minimum wage. No one can live on it. Propose a fair and balanced average annual wage. Invite Wall-Mart executives and their employees to begin the discussion at open congressional hearings. Model this process for corporate executives, doctors, lawyers, some arts administrators, university presidents, professional athletes, entertainers, celebrity authors, and other over compensated Americans: Take a presidential pay cut.
 7. Propose a year of town hall meetings to discuss the following statistic: “While 79% of university entrants in 1970 said their goal in life was to develop a “meaningful philosophy of life,” by 2005, 75% defined their life’s objective as “being very well off financially.” WHAT HAPPENED?



Photograph John Gregor

BOOKNOTES: What I've Been Reading

by Louis Martinelli

It is hard to imagine a more compelling treatment of the problems created by nuclear waste than Carol Rainey's *ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM HOME: Nuclear Contamination in the Communities of The Ohio River Valley* (Cyndell Press, Cincinnati, 2008) Although the book is regional in its focus on six communities concentrated in one part of the United States, its findings are applicable to every radioactively contaminated place in the world. I was startled to learn there is no safe dose level for ionizing radiation exposure (National Academy of Science Report, 2005), there are millions of tons of radioactive waste in this country and throughout the world, and that no technology presently exists which can render radioactive materials completely harmless. The book's motto, "The problem in defense is how far you can go without destroying from within what you are trying to defend from without", is taken from a speech by President Dwight Eisenhower who warned America of the dangers inherent in a military-industrial alliance. Rainey's book documents some of the more insidious, destructive effects of that alliance.

Steve Lopez's *THE SOLOIST* (Putnam, New York, 2008) is an intelligent, moving account of Lopez's friendship with a homeless, schizophrenic cellist – Nathaniel Ayers – who he met on Los Angeles's Skid Row. Lopez – a columnist for the Los Angeles Times – juggles compassion, a growing understanding of mental illness and its treatment controversies, and journalistic objectivity as he struggles to find professional help for Ayers and reconnect him to his family and musician peers. I cannot recommend the film, which I found, sadly, to be a superficial and implausible treatment of a profound book. Save your money and go see *THE READER* – starring Kate Winslet – a movie worthy of the novel it is based on.

Milkweed Edition's publishing of acclaimed fiction writer David Rhodes' *DRIFTLESS* in 2008 might be the fiction book event of last year. Rhodes, who was paralyzed in a motorcycle accident in 1976, had stopped publishing but not writing brilliantly, as this amazing novel demonstrates. Set in Words, Wisconsin, *DRIFTLESS* follows an early Rhodes character, July Montgomery, who came to Words after the senseless murder of his wife. The small town, rural characters surrounding Montgomery defy nearly every upper Midwestern stereotype; there is hardly an emotionally repressed personality among them. As the story moves along its winding, allegorical path, Rhodes' descriptive language becomes more and more stunning. At times, I was reminded of Wendell Berry at his best, but in place of nostalgia, Rhodes paints his farming community with a realistic, contemporary brush. The prologue, by the way, is a terrific prose description of the geologic and human history which make up the "roughly one hundred and sixty miles long and seventy miles wide" driftless region of Southwestern, Wisconsin – a hilly, primitive landscape the glaciers missed.

GIVE ME LIBERTY: A Handbook For American Revolutionaries (Simon and Schuster, New York, 2008) by Naomi Wolf, is a call to action. Wolf, the author of seven books – most noteworthy among them, *THE BEAUTY MYTH* and *THE END OF AMERICA* – takes no prisoners in her searing analysis of the destruction of civil liberties under the Bush administration. Going beyond critique, she shares strategies for social and political change, including sections on how to deal with the media (“become the media”), how to organize a protest demonstration or boycott, how to raise funds, how to write letters, and how to petition. I found Chapter Six – “We Disagree Without Violence” to be particularly relevant in a polarized world. Wolf’s discussion of the damaging effects of TV and Radio pundits on the political conversation of ordinary citizens is worth the price of her book, as is her recounting a weekend retreat in which right to life and pro choice women turned off the pre-recorded tapes and listened, many for the first time, to each other.

Jason Berry’s film, *VOWS OF SILENCE*, is an anatomy of the Vatican justice system. Produced by Berry – author of the groundbreaking *LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION: Catholic Priests and The Sexual Abuse of Children* (Doubleday, New York, 1992) – the film is based on a 2004 book (co-authored with Gerald Renner, Free Press, New York, 2004). Berry finds the roots of the abuse crisis in the Church’s obsession with secrecy, in the papacy of Pope John Paul II, and in the bishops he appointed. *VOWS OF SILENCE* exposes a central figure in this culture of silence, Father Marcial Maciel, who won the favor of John Paul II despite a long history of documented pedophilia. Maciel founded the Legionaires of Christ, a religious order sanctioned by the Vatican, but one corrupted by Maciel’s sexual abuse, psychological tyranny, and the secret vows he imposed to secure Legionaries’ silence. A former Vatican official speaks out in one of the film’s interviews, criticizing the Legion’s cult-like atmosphere. Gary Wills praised Berry’s treatment of this shocking indictment of the Catholic hierarchy, a scandal “less a matter of sex than of power – the power over human lives that fosters, protects and covers up clerical arrogance.” The film, which includes an interview with Jason Berry, can be ordered through its website, www.vowsofsilencefilm.com

I enjoyed the late Frank D. Moore’s collected poems, *NIGHT SINGER* (Cyndell Press, Cincinnati, 2008). I was not familiar with his work until I discovered these wonderfully crafted, lyrical masterpieces. As he makes his way from childhood, Kentucky Appalachian roots toward his final place of rest in Sante Fe, New Mexico, Moore writes about family, nature, love, and loss. In a meditation on an early photograph, he is sitting on a rock, “in the middle of the creek/a frown for the sun. Hemmed in by Aunt Vic and Uncle Ott, / both dead now, I am growing out of their bodies.” The same grandmother who told him “you did not write this poem”, disbelieving his precocious talent, lovingly

teaches him to read, “touching words with her finger.” Later, he celebrates sexual love in *The Kiss*, “Man to man”, refusing to deny his homosexuality. In the collection’s title poem, *Night Singer*, Moore implores the whip-poor-will, “Bird of backwoods, inhabiter of poems, / teach me to whip-poor-will, / abide time passing, / sing near graves in the dark. / Frank Moore is a real find, this handsome edition of his poetry skillfully edited by Carol Rainey.



BOOK REVIEW

Reviewed by Louis Martinelli

EDUCATION NOW: How Rethinking America’s Past Can Change Its Future (Paradigm Publishers, 2009) by Paul Theobald.

Paul Theobald’s EDUCATION NOW is an important book.

Theobald – professor of education at Buffalo State College in New York – tells us that “culture is partly a self-fulfilling prophecy” and that correcting what is wrong with our culture will come about “only at the time most Americans are willing to throw out current assumptions and adopt new ones.” He says this has never been more urgent than now – when intellectual and cultural beliefs about economy, governance, and education have proven to be misguided, damaging democracy itself.

Backed by his experiences as a public school teacher, university administrator and scholar, Theobald argues convincingly against our current standardized test driven, factory model of education in which there isn’t time for informal conversation, a leisurely lunch, or floundering. Subjects traditionally thought to be essential for health and well rounded citizenship – physical education, music and art – are crowded out of the curriculum by whatever courses (usually higher level math and science) the college bound track requires, or whatever courses the more technical, non-college curriculum dictates. Preoccupation with measurement and eliminating risk will drive the college bound student’s up tempo learning experience, whereas an apathetic, “laid back” but alienated classroom environment will define the non college tracked student’s school day.

One consequence of this diverging roads approach to education is that separating pre-college and non-college students ensures a stratified society; another is that neither group is encouraged to experiment with creative approaches to learning, or to think critically outside the cultural box. The relevance of every academic subject to the health of one’s community, to understanding core democratic principles, or as preparation for citizenship is abandoned in favor of future job market success. The “genius and virtue” that are the promise of every learner become nothing more than rhetoric in a system that teaches students to

equate education with upper class privilege and wealth. We have, perhaps, never seen more clearly where cultural conformity and greed have taken us than today, in the energy and economic collapse of 2009.

Not content, as many scholars would be, to merely describe our current crisis, Theobald explores its roots in intellectual history, then proposes we elevate the public purpose of education.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has argued there are two streams of ideas that have shaped American political history. Following Taylor, Theobald calls the first, dominant influence the “L-stream” – so named for John Locke who believed man was pre-political and economically driven. Government’s role, for Locke, was to restrain greed and regulate the economy. The second, subordinate current Theobald calls the “M-stream” – named for the French writer Montesquieu who saw man as essentially political, arguing “the full power of education” was indispensable to a democratic republic. To elevate the purpose of education, for Theobald, is to rescue it from economically driven “L-stream” influences and raise it to social and political “M-stream” consciousness.

Not surprisingly, the “M-stream” advocate Theobald turns to John Dewey and the Progressive Era for a relief map of American school reform. Quoting Dewey: “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.” What Theobald wants, speaking for all of us who not only believe education can restore communities but have experienced this transformation, is a different kind of local control than most of us are familiar with in our urban, suburban and rural schools. His proposals include a local, non elected “Board of Assessors” to monitor the curricular and instructional program of each school; instructional project methods and place-based pedagogy; connecting academic subjects and courses to community betterment (e.g. through community building restoration); and study groups composed of parents and other community participants, teachers, administrators and school board members. To those who object that such reforms are not practical, Theobald quotes the late Paul Gruchow: “Real reforms are, in the beginning, impractical by definition.”

What will be the intrinsic reward for such sweeping change? An experience of what Theobald proposed, in an earlier book: The school as commons – that almost forgotten American public space where democracy happens. And, hopefully one bright day, a restoration of genius and virtue to their rightful place, beyond taxonomy, as the true and enduring purpose of education.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CAROL RAINEY

Question: Wendell Berry, in his foreword to your book, *ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM HOME: Nuclear Contamination In The Ohio River Valley*, called it “almost biblical... a book of revelation.” I can’t recall any higher praise he’s given another book. Was it your intention to write something this deep and large? Do you see *ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM HOME* as a religious or spiritual book, as Berry suggests?

Carol Rainey: Back in the 1980’s when I first realized the magnitude of the nuclear danger – over 70,000 nuclear weapons in the world, enough to blow up the earth many times – I had a kind of religious crisis. What did it mean that we were in danger of destroying creation? Was this how life on earth was “supposed” to end? I began to connect with several religious pacifist groups who were committed to “doing something,” if only calling attention to the danger, to wake people up, to bring about changes in policies. And the world-wide anti-nuclear movement did have some effect. In 2000, when Bush said that nuclear weapons were “back on the table,” I felt some of the same urgency and fear I had felt back in the 1980’s, and the same need to do something. In the 80’s I was concerned about nuclear weapons on the macro-level; this time it was on the micro-level – how the building of bombs in the Ohio River valley contaminated our landscape and our lives. I suppose any action which is motivated by a desire to protect the earth is religious.

Question: Besides the obvious reason – you live in Cincinnati, Ohio – why did you choose to write about nuclear contamination in the Ohio River Valley?

Carol Rainey: As I said, in the 1980’s I was thinking about the danger of all the nuclear weapons to the planet, but I had no real awareness then how dangerous the BUILDING of nuclear weapons was. When I learned what happened at Fernald and Piketon – the two nuclear weapons plants closest to me – I was shocked to realize the danger of radioactive contamination was so near. In the 80’s I had been operating on an abstract level, but now the danger was very immediate and personal. I learned about the sickness of real people, lies of local officials, radioactive fish in the Scioto River, the contamination of the Great Miami River aquifer. One of the insidious things about radiation is its invisibility – one of the reasons workers and plant neighbors weren’t worried in the early days, and one of the reasons that people still are not as concerned about the nuclear danger as they should be. What I learned from all the research, though, was that the EFFECTS of radiation exposure are permanent; some of the radioactive waste will be in this region forever. Perhaps that is another reason working on the book raised religious questions for me. The low-level waste which is at Fernald will be there for 6 BILLION years. To me that means we’re talking about eternity. We have done things which could conceivably damage the planet for as long as it exists.

Question: Why did the government concentrate the nuclear industry – at least in the 1950’s and 60’s – in the Ohio River valley? And how did Cincinnati come to be the industry hub?

Carol Rainey: There are a number of reasons. Though the government said they wanted the plants inland for national security purposes, this may not have been entirely true. The two plutonium production plants – in Hanford, Washington and Savannah River, South Carolina – were near the coast. It may have been because the politicians in Ohio and Kentucky lobbied so heavily for them (Truman’s Vice President was from Paducah, Kentucky) in order to create jobs. It may have been because the government knew the region was politically conservative and not apt to raise a lot of questions about what the military was doing. In the beginning this was the case, but later on, fortunately, the people of the area did speak up, and loudly. It may have been because all of the plants needed to be near rivers, since enormous quantities of water were needed both for the operation of the plants and the disposal of waste. The government guaranteed in the beginning that all waste would be processed before it was put in the river, but this turned out not to be true: Some of the waste got into the streams from accidents and from illegal waste disposal methods.

Question: What was the impact on people’s health after the waste got into the streams?

Carol Rainey: One of the difficult issues in talking about the health effects of nuclear waste is that they are incredibly difficult to measure. This is one reason workers and residents have not had much success in court cases. Even in the successful lawsuit by Fernald’s neighbors, attorneys were not allowed to cite health effects as one of the reasons for damages. There are a number of reasons measurement is so hard. First, in many cases we don’t know exactly what substances workers were exposed to. Records were badly kept in early years, and in some cases destroyed. Second, we don’t know if a synergistic effect of radioactive materials and chemicals could have caused illnesses. Third, the government has maintained in most of the nuclear court cases that most American cancers are caused by diet and smoking, although one nuclear physicist, John Gofman, has done research showing there is a very high probability of lung cancers when smokers are exposed to radioactive substances; that is, the two dangers reinforce each other. Fourth, it’s hard to say why some people are directly affected by exposures and others apparently not, although some biologists believe if there is genetic damage to cells from low-level radiation illnesses may not show up for generations. In short, nuclear biology is still in its early stages. Back in the 1950’s, the Atomic Energy Commission had a certain threshold for “safe” radiation exposure, and through the years the level has been getting lower and lower. Many scientists today think there is NO safe level. We just don’t know the health effects. Unfortunately, many of the workers who were endangered in the early

years of the Cold War – when there was minimal worker protection and much carelessness in the operation of the plants – are now dead. And even though the EPA is monitoring all the sites which I talk about in the book, it's not clear at this point how much of the data is going to be made available to the public. The Bush administration did a scary thing in CLOSING the EPA libraries to public access, although that policy has, thankfully, been changed and they are open again. We were told the secrecy was necessary for national security purposes, but the secrecy also allowed the government to get away with doing a lot of things which put workers and the natural environment at risk.

Question: Your description of the damage to land, property and the rural community surrounding Jefferson Proving Ground in Southern Indiana is chilling – like the military's practice bombing of a church the government had acquired through eminent domain.

Carol Rainey: Yes. The environmental destruction of all the sites – especially the rich farmland in Southern Indiana near Jefferson, and the farms in close proximity to Fernald – is chilling. Rural community life in Southern Indiana was destroyed when the weapons testing ground was built. Not surprisingly, today there are economic problems in the Madison area; the community has had a hard time recreating itself.

At Jefferson and Fernald, I found evidence that there were some holdouts – people who didn't want to relinquish their farms to the government. There were probably also holdouts at the other sites. I came across one story about a nuclear site in the South where two elderly people with rifles tried to prevent the government bulldozers from coming in. They were not only arrested, but were put in mental institutions. But it makes you wonder, now, who were the crazy ones.

Question: Which takes me back to that terrible, ironic image of a church in Indiana the American military bombed in order to perfect the destruction of ENEMY property. Robert J. Lifton, the American psychiatrist and author, has written about what he calls "gunism" – the belief that no weapon is too destructive if its purpose is to defend one's home, or one's country.

Carol Rainey: Yes. Good point. I haven't done a lot of reading on the psychology of nuclear weapons production – though DR. STRANGELOVE was part of my heritage when I was growing up. I do know that Hiroshima evoked a mixed reaction – some people were horrified, some proud that we now had the most destructive bomb in the world. The obsession with the super bomb is connected with MACHISMO in its most irrational and dangerous form. When Adlai Stevenson said in the 50's that we should stop building the H-bomb, he was called soft. Up until very recently any political leader who advocated nuclear disarmament was open to the same charge. Now Henry Kissinger, of all people, is saying nuclear weapons should be abolished. Things are changing. The dangers and lunacy are becoming more apparent to everyone.

Question: What would you say to those who maintain the development of nuclear weapons and the development of so called peaceful nuclear energy plants are two entirely different realities? What is the relevance of your research to this argument?

Carol Rainey: The weapons plants came first. People in the government only began the aggressive promotion of nuclear power plants in the 60's when they realized there was a weapons surplus, and when they didn't want to shut down the uranium enrichment plants in case those plants were needed in the future for nuclear weapons production. The nuclear power plants which were built were poorly designed; there were cost overruns, shutdowns, and accidents. After Three Mile Island, no new plants were constructed.

For the last ten years, the nuclear industry has been promoting a “nuclear renaissance,” wanting to build a new generation of nuclear power plants which it says are safe, cheap, and preferable to coal — and thus environmentally “clean.” There are several ways to respond to these arguments.

First, there are no guarantees the new plants are safe. All the industry has are computer models. Private investors aren't convinced of their safety, which means the only way the plants could come into being would be through taxpayer subsidy; that is, the public would be asked to take the risks which private industry will not. Second, a recent study has shown that even the most sophisticated of the new models is not “airplane safe,” — that is, it could still be the target of an attack. Third, we have a gigantic safety problem with the high-level waste which already exists from nuclear power plants still in operation, and which is stored in adjacent cooling ponds. We still don't know what to do with this waste. The plans for storage at Yucca Mountain have been scrapped. If the waste stays where it is, in reinforced containers, it still makes people nervous. Chicago, which has several nuclear power plants, is starting to worry about the rising water level of Lake Michigan. People in New England near the power plants on the coast are worried about the rising sea level there. Money for nuclear research ought to be directed toward solving the unsafe waste problems we already have, not on building new plants and generating more waste.

Beyond issues of safety, it's not true that nuclear is “clean.” The mining and processing of uranium is very energy inefficient and very polluting. The gaseous diffusion enrichment plant at Paducah, Kentucky — which I write about in my book — at one time required as much coal-generated energy per day as New York City. Its electric bill is still \$17 million a month. To have any impact at all on climate change, there would have to be thousands of new nuclear power plants built immediately throughout the world, costing trillions of dollars and run perfectly with no accidents or mistakes. Given the state of the global economy, it simply isn't feasible to make an investment in something still so risky.

Alternative energy sources – wind, solar, geothermal – are much safer and much cheaper. Because we are still paying for the cleanup and monitoring of the old nuclear weapon sites, we will be paying for the old weapons’ mistakes for a long time.

Question: I find myself pulled back to that line from William Blake, written over a century ago: “Energy is delight.” What you’ve been describing is anything but delightful. What is a better direction than nuclear power to meet our short and long term energy needs?

Carol Rainey: For Blake, energy is a kind of mystical term for the life-force of the universe. That’s something quite different than the current political use of the word, which is, narrowly, what we need to run our cars and appliances. What should we do? We can cut back on our use of cars and appliances, for one thing, so we don’t need so much artificially generated ‘energy.’ Nuclear fuels have been a disaster. Coal has been a disaster. It looks like O’Bama’s new energy Secretary is going to spearhead research and development in solar, wind and geothermal sources, which is a good sign. Some nuclear scientists are working on the development of nuclear fusion. It’s the opposite of what we have now. Proponents like it because it uses sea-water, rather than uranium, and would be far less environmentally destructive. However, scientists have been working on fusion for 40 years and still haven’t been able to get it to work, so its not really something we can rely on. The history of the fissionable nuclear industry has made me personally leery of nuclear science. My fears may be irrational, but I prefer the idea of a more modestly run planet, which uses safe, renewal energy sources and is based on respect for the life-force itself. If Blake were alive today, I think he would be horrified by how far away from the essential rhythm of things we have come.



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